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LA FONTAINE
AND OTHER FRENCH FABULISTS.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

APOLLONIUS, the mystic philosopher of Tyana, was defending Æsop's fables against the criticism of a friend who had characterised them as "fit only for old women to tell to children." "I will tell you," said he, "a story about Æsop that was told to me by my mother." Æsop was in his early life a shepherd, who fed his flocks near a temple of Mercury. He longed earnestly for wisdom, and prayed the god to give it him. So did many other suppliants, who all brought rich offerings to the temple, each according to his means : one offered gold, another silver, a third an ivory caduceus. The shepherd Æsop brought only from time to time a libation of milk from his flock, a handful of honeycomb, or bunches of myrtle with a few roses and violets intermixed. He did not even stay to make these latter into wreaths—the god, he

said, would surely not have him neglect his flock to be weaving garlands. At last the day came when Mercury was to distribute the gift of wisdom, in its various kinds, to his expectant votaries. To the most liberal of the petitioners he assigned the gift of philosophy ; to the second, the power of oratory ; to a third, astronomy ; to a fourth, music ; and excellence in the various kinds of verse to others respectively. When he had come to the end of his gifts, he found that he had passed over *Æsop* by mistake,—a curious oversight, as the biographer of Apollonius sceptically remarks, on the part of so keen a deity as Mercury. Then he bethought himself of the Art of Fable—“as the only branch of the family of wisdom left at his disposal.” In his own precocious childhood, the Hours had kept him quiet in his cradle by telling him fables. “Take, as my gift to thee,” said the god to *Æsop*, “the art which I learned first myself.”¹

This story of Apollonius, or whoever was the inventor of it, describes the origin of Fable very gracefully, and perhaps with as near an approach to truth as has been attained by more learned speculations : while it seems to assign to this kind of literature its true place in the scale of intellectual creation. It can rank neither with philosophy nor with poetry of the highest kind ; it has not the pretensions of rhetoric or of eloquence ; yet, in its finished form, it contains much of the philosopher’s ethics, it enlists in its service some of the most graceful of the poet’s gifts, and carries in its application a terse and pointed force of which the orator and the rhetorician have often been glad to avail themselves.

¹ Philostratus, Vit. Apoll., v. 15.

Nor was the author wrong in representing it as the earliest gift of the Muses. There is no need here to discuss the question how far the form of apostrophe which we call fable is Eastern in its origin—a mere development of that figurative diction of which the Hebrew Scriptures give us the earliest and most perfect existing example: or how far the adoption of the animal world to represent the various characters in the drama (a feature common to all European fables) may be taken as evidence of a connection with the Indian doctrine of metempsychosis—the outward form of beast or bird containing for a time the human spirit with its special virtues or vices. Both theories may be true so far as this, that in the East and in India, Fable early found a congenial home, and developed itself rapidly. But it is hardly to be limited geographically as to birthplace. Rather it is one of the natural productions of the human mind,—the common property, so far as its invention is concerned, of various nations at some stage of their civilisation, second perhaps in antiquity only to language itself, and one of its earliest and most natural developments. Unwritten fables, like unwritten poetry and unwritten law, must have been current long before the art of writing had been discovered, and were probably handed on in many cases by oral tradition from one nation to another, as was the case with myths and legends. Jotham's fable of the Trees who had to choose their King, and Jehoash's of the Thistle and the Cedar, recorded in Old Testament history,¹ are only the survivors, we may be sure, of many such apocalypses in which lessons of practical wisdom were taught to a rude

¹ Judges ix. 7; 2 Kings xiv. 9.

and simple people. Nathan's pathetic story of the poor man's single lamb was not the only instance in which the seers of ancient times made use of fable to teach moderation to irresponsible kings. The fable of "The Two Pots," which La Fontaine translates from *Æsop*, is to be found with its shrewd moral in the book of the "Wisdom of the Son of Sirach"—"Have no fellowship with one that is mightier and richer than thyself; for how agree the kettle and the earthen pot together? for if the one be smitten against the other, it shall be broken."¹ It is indeed needless to point out to readers of the Hebrew Scriptures how this form of teaching pervades the whole of the prophetic books, and how much of their spirit and beauty is derived from that language of apologue which is nothing more or less than undeveloped fable. Rabbinical literature abounds with fables, often of remarkable force and beauty; and the parables which form one of the most striking and interesting features of Christ's teaching in the Gospels were only the adaptation by the great Teacher, who drew "out of his treasure things both new and old," of a style of instruction already popular, and suited both to the tastes and the comprehension of his hearers. It is not only that we have so many parables of His recorded—seven of them following each other, with a rapidity and compression which is almost abrupt, in one chapter of St Matthew—and these probably only a selection from His utterances, but the whole of the Gospels are a storehouse of parable, or fable, call it which we will. The blind leading the blind, the mote and the beam (which is, in effect, the fable of "The

¹ Ecclesiasticus xiii. 2.

Double Wallet"),¹ the new wine in the old bottles, the broad and the narrow gate,—all these and many similar illustrations might serve, so to speak, as the headings of fables of which we have simply the outlines and the application in the sacred text, but only needing to be clothed with the ordinary details of narrative and dialogue to make them fables in form as well as in essence. So it is with proverbs,—a mode of compressing practical truths of which no one particular nation can claim the invention, because we find that every nation possesses, in addition to those which seem to have a common origin, peculiar proverbs of its own: these too, when examined, are found at once, in most instances, to be fables in a skeleton shape.

The literature of fables is not to be traced to any great extent in the classical writers of Greece or Rome. They might have been, and probably were, current amongst both these nations; but the works of such writers of the most brilliant period of both Greece and Rome as have reached us are, with few exceptions, of a more finished and a severer type. Homer has nothing which can properly come under the denomination of fable; and the earliest Greek fable that we know is the solitary specimen to be found in Hesiod,—“The Lark and the Nightingale.” But this is remarkable as having the characteristic which is wanting alike in the fables of the Hebrew writers and in the earliest fable which remains to us in Roman literature,—that which Livy relates as having been spoken by Menenius Agrippa to the commons of Rome, known to us in its modern version as “The Belly and the Members.”² The fable of Hesiod

¹ La Fontaine, i. 7.

² Ibid., iii. 2.

introduces animals as holding conversation, an idea so largely developed by the later fabulists. It is the original of La Fontaine's "Kite and Nightingale," though he certainly did not borrow it directly from the Greek poet. Hesiod's text runs thus (it may be well to give it in a literal version):—

"Thus spake the Hawk to the speckled Nightingale, as he bore her aloft in the clouds after he had seized her in his claws,—now she was crying pitifully, pierced by his curved talons, when he taunted her besides with insulting words,—‘Wretch ! why dost thou shriek ? One far stronger than thee now holds thee in his grasp ; and thou must needs go wherever I shall carry thee, songstress though thou be; and I shall make a meal of thee, or let thee go, as I choose. Foolish is he who will fain contend with the stronger : he hath no chance of victory, and brings grief upon himself besides disgrace.’"—‘Works and Days,’ 201.

It comes to us in a highly polished form from La Fontaine's hands, though it is by no means one of his best efforts, and the moral is still one of unredeemed brutality :—

“A villain Kite, whose robber-life had spread
His fame around, and still the mischief grew,
Till all the neighbours heard his cry with dread,
And village children hooted as he flew,
Had seized at last a hapless Nightingale :
The herald of the spring, with piteous wail,
Begged hard for life. ‘Oh, gentle robber, spare me !
I’m a poor meal for choice—
A wretched bird with little else but voice !
Don’t tear me,
But rather hear me :
I’ll sing of Tereus.’—‘Tereus ? what was he ?
Something to make a dainty dish for me ?’

'Nay,' said the bird, 'he was a cruel king,
 Whose evil love was my undoing :
 List to the tuneful lay that I shall sing
 Of his unholy wooing,
 So sadly sweet, it charms each listening ear ;
 You too will be delighted, when you hear.'
 'Truly,' the Kite replied, 'a likely thing !
 A charming proposition !

I want a meal just now, not a musician.'
 'Yet kings have heard me gladly.'—'When a king
 Has caught you,' said the Kite, 'then you can squall
 For his amusement : I'm a Kite, you see ;
 Your music is ridiculous to me ;
 A hungry stomach has no ears at all.'"

The moral, as has been said, is that of the most unfeeling cynicism ;—common, as we shall find, to many of the fables of antiquity, but of which this is perhaps the most striking as it is among the earliest examples. The rule of the strongest ; the futility of argument in the presence of force ; the still greater folly of resistance on the part of the weaker ; the policy of evasion, if possible, and submission as the alternative,—this is the teaching of ancient fable on the whole, and must not be laid to the charge of the moderns who have reproduced or imitated it. Such ethics have all the flavour of those far-off days in the history of nations when the only law prevailing was the law of the strongest—the "simple plan,"—

"That he should take who has the power,
 And he should keep who can."¹

¹ It is certainly possible to draw a less brutal and more humorous moral from this version of the fable—not to expect to find in a hungry man a very patient listener. When Henry IV. of France was entering a town during one of his campaigns, the magistrates met him at the gates prepared with a long address. "Sire," they began,

It has been conjectured that fable was a happy invention to enable wise men to speak the truth to despots without peril to themselves under the veil of fiction; and the use made of it by Nathan in his rebuke of David has been naturally adduced in support of the theory; though David, with all his faults, can hardly be termed a despot, and Nathan is plain-spoken enough in his application. The fables which survive in classical literature are, as has been said, very few; but one of the earliest is that which Herodotus makes Cyrus quote to the Ionians, who offered their submission too late—the story of “The Fish and the Flute-player.”¹ Another is that employed (according to Justin) to induce King Comanus to destroy the growing colony at Marseilles before it became too powerful for its neighbours—that of “The Bitch and her Litter,” as we have it in *Æsop* and in La Fontaine.² These cannot certainly be said to contain any lesson for princes, any more than the fable by which Josephus, the Jewish historian, makes Tiberius explain his dislike to change his governors of provinces—“The Wounded Traveller and the Flies.”³ But, indeed, the lesson commonly

“when Hannibal was setting out from Carthage——” “*Ventre St Gris!* gentlemen,” said the impatient monarch, “before Hannibal left Carthage I feel quite sure he had dined—and I want my dinner.” There is a story told of Malherbe that, dining on one occasion with the Abbé Desportez, he arrived rather late, when the soup was being served. His host met him in the anteroom, and finding that Malherbe had not read his new translation of the Psalms, wanted to fetch a copy at once and to read some extracts. Malherbe begged to be allowed to have his dinner first, telling Desportez he was “sure that his soup must be better than his Psalms.”

¹ Herod., i. c. 141. La Font., x. 11. A version also appears in M. P. Lacroix’s ‘Nouvelles Œuvres Inédites de J. la F.’, p. 7.

² Justin, xlivi. c. 4.

³ Jos. Ant., xviii. c. 6. § 5. The fable, however, in a somewhat

conveyed in this kind of allegory is not addressed to rulers so much as to their subjects. It rarely impresses upon irresponsible power — unless by way of satirical inference — the duties of justice and moderation ; it rather assumes the supreme authority of the monarch as matter, if not of divine right, yet of recognised law, and teaches obedience in the subject, if not as a duty, still as the only safe and expedient line of conduct. We have the wisdom and the experience of the sage ; but the wisdom is worldly, and the experience cynical. If early fable preserves in its character the traces of a state of society under the pressure of despotism, the point which comes out most sharply of all is the difficulty experienced under such circumstances of keeping one's head safely on one's shoulders. The sage who speaks under the shelter of fable gives counsels of prudence rather than of perfection. As one brief example out of many, we may take the well-known fable attributed to Æsop, whose original

different shape, is much older than Tiberius. Aristotle (*Rhet.*, ii. 20) quotes it as from Æsop, and La Fontaine has versified it, from that or some other source, as "The Fox and the Flies" (xii. 13). A shorter version appears amongst his 'Fables Inédites' collected by M. Lacroix ; and in this case the first draft has not gained by expansion :—

" Sick in a ditch, one sultry day,
Devoured by flies, poor Reynard lay,
And loud complained of Fortune's spite,
That left him in such grievous plight.
A Hedgehog, passing by that way
(His first appearance in my play),
Proposed, with neighbourly attention,
To rid him of the pests I mention.
The Fox—a beast of prudent mind—
At once, with many thanks, declined ;
'I dread,' said he, 'with more alarm,
A fresh and therefore hungrier swarm ;
These have well fed ; and, though not pleasant,
Will bite less keenly for the present.'"

is certainly neither Greek nor Roman, but oriental in character, from whatever early source derived — the hunting-party of the Lion, the Ass, and the Fox, where the Lion requests the Ass to make a fair distribution of the game. That innocent and honest animal divides the whole into three perfectly equal shares, upon which his royal partner does instant execution upon him, and then requests the Fox to make a new and more appropriate allotment. The Fox, with courtier-like discretion, assigns nearly the whole to the Lion, reserving a very inconsiderable share for himself. When the gratified potentate asks what had taught him this admirable skill in division, the Fox replies, “the fate of the Ass.” And the brief and pointed moral—if moral it may be called—is, that “the wise take a lesson from the misfortunes of their neighbours.” The wisdom of proverbs is pretty nearly the same. It will be found to a great extent in the Proverbs of Solomon, though tempered and restrained by a higher morality. The leaven of Eastern despotism still pervaded the Hebrew monarchy. “The wrath of a king is as messengers of death, but a wise man will pacify it.” “When thou sittest at meat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before thee; and put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite.” (Have we not here, veiled under the strong metaphor of proverb, the very moral of the fable just mentioned—a warning as to “the lion’s share”?) “A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself; but the simple pass on, and are punished.” “By long forbearing is a prince persuaded, and a soft tongue breaketh the bone.” These are only a few of the many forms in which we find repeated the warning of the Preacher—“Where the word of a

king is, there is power; and who may say unto him, What doest thou?"¹ It is true, and must be carefully borne in mind in noticing this feature of Hebrew philosophy, which represents the power and the anger of the irresponsible monarch as what the wise man will rather deprecate than brave, that there is another side of its teaching, presented with even greater force and emphasis. The lesson for princes is enforced as plainly as the lesson for subjects—that it is only the king who gives faithful judgment to the poor, whose "throne shall be established for ever," and that it is the prince "that wanteth understanding" that is commonly the "great oppressor."²

But Grimm is no doubt right in his view that the motive of fable was originally not moral instruction, but simply entertainment. There is very little moral of any sort (except that they generally inculcate kindness to the lower animals) in the Indian fables which are known to us, and which are probably of at least as early date as the oriental apologetics which have just been noticed. The former may indeed be more properly called beast-stories, if the word fable is to be understood as implying, as La Fontaine explains it, a combination of body and soul—the first being the story, and the second its application. Such beast-stories seem to be a phase of narrative fiction common to the infancy of nations, when the natures and habits of the animal world are more intimately understood, and when man himself does not hold a position so high above that of the beasts in the scale of creation. We find these kind of stories almost as common among the peoples of the new world of the West as among the primitive races of the East. The North American chief

¹ Ecclesiastes viii. 4.

² Prov. xxix. 14; xxviii. 16.

who calls himself the "Great Serpent," or the "Little Bear," indicates the same sympathy with the lower animal natures, and is only reversing the process which ascribed to them the moral qualities and attributes of man. The composition of real fables containing a moral would almost certainly be later in date than these more simple and childlike stories, which supplied the place of literature to a primitive generation. Such an order of precedence corresponds with our own experience in modern times : the novel "with a purpose," now so persistently forced upon us, is quite a recent development of the earlier work of pure fiction, which assumed to do no more than entertain. But when the fable-teller began to aspire to add a moral to his tale, he found ready to his hand these stock characters of the popular animal drama. Their several habits and characteristics had already been noted, and were accepted as the current coin of story ; they had already been made to talk, and he made them talk didactically. This explains the adoption of animals as the personages of the fabulist's drama more naturally than the ingenious suggestion of Lessing, that they were chosen because their natures and propensities, unlike those of their human fellow-creatures, were known and fixed ; whereas, "if Nero and Britannicus had been adopted as representative figures instead of the Wolf and the Lamb, not half mankind would have recognised their character."

The use of *apologue* was largely recognised by the early Christian preachers. St Cyril (Constantin), known as "the apostle of the Slaves," published in the ninth century a collection of "Moral *Apologues*," to serve as illustrations, which now survive only in a Latin transla-

tion. Two or three of them appear in another form in La Fontaine.¹ Vincent de Beauvais, a Dominican friar, about 1200, turned some of the fables of Phædrus, and others from old collections, into very indifferent Latin prose, for the use of preachers, under the title of 'Spectrum Doctrinale,' and of this there are French translations which possibly La Fontaine might have seen.² John of Bromyard, two centuries later, put forth a large volume of Fables specially for the use of preachers; and while the romances and *fableaux* of the middle ages abound with satirical stories directed, though possibly without any malicious or irreverent purpose, against the Church, its claims and its ordinances, the medieval pulpit was not slow to employ fable of the most lively and humorous kind to enforce its teaching. S. Vincent Ferrier, the great Spanish Dominican preacher, drew original morals from some of the early fables; employing, for instance, Æsop's fable of the Man and his two Wives³ as an argument against marriage generally, inasmuch as a young wife would pillage her husband in order to spend upon her own pleasures, while an old one would rob him of all his pleasures to indulge her own ill-humour. Vieyra, who may be classed either with the medieval or the modern churchmen, is remarkable for his use of this kind of illustration. Our own Bede is even more so. Great French preachers like Oliver Maillard and Michael Menot used it with striking, if sometimes grotesque, effect; and the same was the case with some of our English Puritans. Rowland Hill's stories too often came very near buffoonery. Even now, a pithy and well-told story, with its application, will arrest the flagging

¹ vii. 12; ix. 4.

² i. 4, 6, 10.

³ i. 17.

attention of a modern audience when graver appeals fail. So wide and universal is that "Power of Fables," which La Fontaine has made the subject of one of his pieces (fable it can hardly in itself be called), dedicated to M. Barillon, then French ambassador to England, in which he apologises for offering so slight a thing to one in such dignified position.¹ He has there versified the anecdote recorded of the Athenian orator, Demades, who, when he found all his impassioned rhetoric fail to rouse his audience to a due sense of the peril which was threatening them from Philip, suddenly stopped, and said he would tell them a story : "Ceres was once travelling in company with a swallow and a serpent. The party came to a river ; the swallow flew across, and the serpent swam." Here he paused. "And what did Ceres do ?" shouted the eager Athenians. "What did Ceres do, indeed !" replied the orator, with bitter contempt ; "why do you not rather ask what Philip is doing ?" But the author, in his concluding application, does not altogether endorse the indignation of Demades.

"Tried by this test, we are Athenians all ;
Even I, who here can moralise sedately,
If a good story in my way should fall,
I must confess I should enjoy it greatly.
The world is old, you say ? Well,—as you will ;
But, like a child, it needs amusing still."

¹ viii. 4

CHAPTER II.

LA FONTAINE'S ORIGINALS.

IT is with La Fontaine and his Fables that we are chiefly to deal in these pages. He is the representative fable-writer not only of France but of modern literature. He had predecessors in his own line, in France as well as elsewhere, who have become best known to modern readers through his pages, and he has had successors of whom the most successful have been those who imitated him the most closely.

But La Fontaine has no claim to originality so far as his subject-matter is concerned. Very few indeed of his fables are original in that sense, and those few are among the weakest. He borrowed his subjects and his characters wherever he could find them : it was by the charm of his style, and his mode of presenting them, that he made them virtually his own. They were very seldom the children of his own brain, but after their adoption he had bestowed upon them, with much pains and with the happiest result, such charms of dress, manner, accomplishment, and language, that they owed much more to him than to their actual parents.

He would have been himself the first to disclaim the

right of inventive genius. The first words with which he introduces his Fables are—

“I sing the heroes of whom Æsop was the father.”

Who this Æsop was we do not very well know, and La Fontaine knew even less. His very existence has been doubted. He was a slave, we are told, an Asiatic—black and humpbacked, more than doubtful tradition adds—who received his freedom from his master in reward for his gift of story-telling, and (if we are still to follow the same doubtful authority) met his death at the hands of the citizens of Delphi, in return for reciting to them a fable, more apposite than complimentary, to express his extreme disappointment with them and their city, which he had travelled so far to see.¹ His fables were current at Athens in her greatest days: “something good out of Æsop” is what an Athenian voter in the comedy asks of a candidate as the price of his vote; and Socrates is represented by Plato as amusing himself in his last hours by turning into verse “such as he could remember” of these fables. But this makes it very doubtful whether at that date any of them had been committed to writing. They made their appearance, however, more than once at a later period in a Greek poetical dress, and such fragments of any authentic version as remain to us are probably to be found in Babrius (Gabrias, La Fontaine calls him), a Greek poet probably living about the first century, whose works (excepting a few fragments) are comparatively a recent

¹ The fable was the same as that given by La Fontaine, Book iv. 10—a somewhat poor one—of the pieces of “flotsam” in the sea, which at a distance may be mistaken for boats.

discovery.¹ The “Æsop” which La Fontaine speaks of, and which he might have seen, is a spurious collection bearing Æsop’s name, formed by an Eastern monk, Planudes, in the fourteenth century, which became very popular, and was translated or paraphrased in various shapes by later writers. Gabriel Faérne put them into Latin iambics of considerable elegance, published in 1564, after his death; and these were subsequently translated again into French verse by Charles Perrault, in 1699. Benserade, whom La Fontaine mentions, had also compressed some of Æsop’s fables into French quatrains, which were graven on the pedestals of a series of groups representing the subjects of each fable, once standing in what was called the labyrinth at Versailles.² The Latin version of these Æsopic fables attributed to Phædrus had also been published in France by Pithou, in 1596, and was probably well known. There is also a collection of ancient fables by Isaac Nevelet, published in 1610, in which are included those of Avienus and of Abstemius of Urbino, who to a selection of Æsop’s fables translated from the Greek had added many of his own, several of which reappear in La Fontaine’s pages. It is, therefore, most probable that Nevelet’s book had come into his hands.

He is hardly justified in claiming in his preface “the

¹ By M. Minoide Minas, in a monastery at Mount Athos, in 1843.

² Dr Martin Lister, in his ‘Journey to Paris,’ 1698, has a quaint notice of these figures: “In the groves on the left hand you have Æsop’s Fables in so many pieces of water-works here and there in winding alleys. This might be said to have been done ‘*in usum Delphini.*’ ‘Tis pretty to see the Owle washt by the birds; the Munkie hugging his little one, till it spouts out water with a full throat and open mouth.”

glory of having opened this path" in literature to the moderns. There were at least three or four of his countrymen, besides those just mentioned, who had made the attempt before him with more or less success, and whose fables he might have seen. Gilles Corrozet, "reader" to Charles IX. of France, had put into French verse certain "fables of Æsop the Phrygian," early in the sixteenth century. These were more than once reprinted, but possibly had been nearly forgotten. Yet Corrozet's versions of the well-known fables of "The Old Man and Death," "The Ox and the Frog," and "The Stag and the Oxen" (reproduced by La Fontaine under the title of "The Master's Eye," one of his very best), though brief and simple in form, are terse and spirited. It appears certain that La Fontaine must have seen Corrozet's work, for he has borrowed from him several turns of expression, and at least in one case, a whole line. Guillaume Haudent, Master of the Choristers at Rouen, published about the same time 'Three hundred and thirty-six Apologues of Æsop,'—a much larger collection than Corrozet's, but not so good. For some of them he was certainly not indebted to Æsop in any shape. One of the best is plainly medieval; M. Robert thinks he got it out of the Latin fables of Philephus. Jean Raulin, a preacher of the fifteenth century, has introduced it with but little alteration into one of his sermons on Penitence.¹ Haudent calls it "The Confession of the Ass, the Fox, and the Wolf," and it is the same which appears in La Fontaine's version as "The Animals sick of the Pestilence." In Haudent's fable, the three animals are travelling together on a pil-

¹ 'Itinerarium Paradisi,' Sermon xiv.

grimage to Rome, to get absolution from the Pope. Seeing the crowds on the road bent upon the same errand, they fear lest they may be overlooked by his Holiness, and fail to get absolution; so they agree to make mutual confession to each other. The Wolf first goes on his knees. He had one day seen a fine fat sow, and had eaten her up—"as a cruel and detestable mother, who must have left her little ones in the sty to die of hunger." Next day, considering that the orphans must starve now, at any rate, he had eaten them too—"for the pity that he had of them, to see them suffer." But, if he had done wrong, he was very penitent—what should be his penance, so that he might get absolution? The Fox assigns him one *Paternoster*—to be said standing. Then comes the turn of the Fox. He had killed and eaten a cock—but solely because he was so fierce and overbearing, attacking all other cocks, and tormenting all quiet people (especially those who had headaches), night and day, with his perpetual crowings. Then, the Fox admitted, he had eaten the hens as well, but only because they kept perpetually reproaching him with the death of their lord and master. The penance enjoined upon him by the Wolf is to eat no flesh for three whole Fridays—that is to say, if he can get none. Lastly, the Ass has to tell his tale. He represents what a hard life he always leads; how he is continually beaten and half-starved. One day he was carrying sacks to the mill; he had had no breakfast; he saw some bits of straw sticking out of the wooden shoes of the man who was leading him. He pulled out a few straws and ate them; he was very hungry; and he did not know that any harm had come of it. But he

was willing to submit to any penance. "Thief and murderer!" cried Wolf and Fox both at once; "you stole the straw the poor man had stuffed into his shoes to keep his feet warm; and he perished miserably of cold, very likely, in consequence!" For such an act, death could be the only fitting punishment. And they fell upon the Ass and devoured him there and then, "so that not a morsel of him was left."

The same fable appears in another form in the 'Livre d'Emblèmes' of Guillaume Gueroult, which contains some five or six fables, all good. In his version the Lion takes the place of the Fox, and when he confesses his peccadilloes in the matter of herds and flocks, the Wolf hastens to assure him that as monarch of the beasts he has the right to make his own laws,—the king can do no wrong. His majesty, in turn, absolves the Wolf for acts of the like kind; it is "his custom so to do," he believes—and probably hunger compelled him. In neither case is there any mention of penance. The Ass makes much the same confession as in Haudent's version, but there is an amusing variation in the Wolf's denunciation of his guilt. "What! eat the straw in your master's shoe? and if his foot had been in it, no doubt you would have eaten that too!" The culprit meets, of course, with the same fate. Here are two predecessors, at least, who trod the same ground as La Fontaine: and, admirable as his version is, it owes any superiority it may have entirely to the charm of his style; in point of humour, Haudent's has the advantage. La Fontaine will lose much in any translation; but the following may at least serve to show his variations on the theme:—

THE ANIMALS IN THE PLAGUE—(vii. 1).

“One of those scourges which Heaven’s righteous wrath
Invented for the crimes of earth—
The Plague, if one must call
The visitation by its hideous name—
Down on the animal world in fury came—
Death day by day to some, sore pains to all.
The love of life no more had power to move :
Food lost its relish : wolf nor fox
Prowled round the innocent flocks ;
The turtle-dove
Fled from her sickening mate : there was no love,
And therefore no more joy.
The Lion held a council, and spake out :
‘ My friends,’ said he, ‘ this pest the gods employ
To punish our misdeeds, I make no doubt ;
Wherefore it seems to me
’Twere fit the greatest sinner of us all
Should sacrifice himself in expiation,
So to avert Heaven’s wrath, and save the nation.
You that read history know that, in such case,
These acts of self-devotion find their place.
Let each examine then, as truth compels,
Without equivocation,
The tale his several conscience tells,
And so make revelation.
As for myself, I candidly confess
To satisfy my greediness
I have devoured sheep not a few,
Who never did me harm ; nay, now and then
I ate the shepherd too.
I will devote myself, I say again,
If needful ; but I think the rest are bound
To make a clean confession first, all round.
Our earnest wish, I hope and trust, is
The guiltiest should pay this debt of justice.’

'Sire,' said the Fox, 'you have too good a heart—'

Such scruples show it;

But as for eating sheep,—why, for my part,

I see no sin in that—the stupid brutes !

You do them too much honour, if they know it.

As for the shepherd, if your taste he suits,

Why, I can safely say, by nature's laws,

He well deserves to reap the righteous fruits

Of man's preposterous claim to hold dominion

Over us free-born beasts. That's my opinion.'

So spake the Fox ; and flatterers hummed applause.
It was not safe to probe too close the offences

Of the great nobles there,

Tiger, or bear,

Against whose life there might have been complaints :
All for their deeds found very fair pretences,

Down to the very dogs that chased a hare,—
To hear them talk, they were four-footed saints.

The Ass in turn advanced to make confession :

'I mind me once,' said he,

'When that the devil of hunger took possession

Of poor unhappy me,

I passed a grassy mead

Belonging to some monks, and in my need

(It was so tempting) I just took one bite—

A mouthful—I confess it was not right.'

All with one voice cried out upon the thief ;

A Wolf, who had some smattering of law,
Against the prisoner straight took up his brief :

'A mangy, thick-skinned brute as e'er I saw !

From him, my lords, no doubt,

Has all this public misery come about :

Rank felony ! to eat another's grass !'

Plainly, the righteous victim was the Ass :

No expiation short of death ! And straight

The wretch went to his fate.

As you have power or weakness at your back,

The court whitewashes you or brands you black."

One point introduced in this version is characteristic of the author : he alone satirically enhances the guilt of the unfortunate victim by making him eat the *monks'* grass : he seldom let pass an opportunity of a sneer at the cloister.

Some of these previous attempts to give the old Greek and Latin fables a French dress must therefore have been known to La Fontaine ; but he passes them over in his preface with the brief remark that though it is true that "some of his countrymen have worked in that direction, our language was then so different from what it is now, that one can only regard them as foreigners." It is curious that an author who speaks in terms of such high admiration of Greek and Roman literature, should have showed so little appreciation of the early literature of his own country.

The sixteenth century produced no other French fable-writers of any mark, though some clever versions from the Latin appeared from time to time ; as in Clement Marot's pretty rendering of "The Lion and the Mouse," which he sent from his prison in the Châtelet in a letter to a friend, as a hint to him that a good turn done to the humblest in time of need might not be without its reward. La Fontaine's version of the same fable (ii. 11) is by no means so good as his "master's."

There is one author of a much earlier date than these, who may perhaps be called French, and to whom La Fontaine has by some been thought to be indebted. A lady of whom we know little but what she tells us of herself—"Marie is my name, and I am of France"—(she was probably of Norman parentage), and who had already written some "Lays" of chivalry, early in the thirteenth century translated into eight-syllabled verse,

in the "Romance" language, rather more than a hundred fables. She calls her collection 'Fables d'Ysopez,' and it is commonly known as the 'Dit d'Ysopet;' but only some thirty are to be found under Æsop's name, and many of them can be traced to no known author. In these we find allusions to the Mass, to the keeping of Lent, to monastic life, and to many other things quite unknown to Æsop. She undertook this work, she tells us, "for the love of the earl William"—who is thought to be William "Longsword;" and it was almost certainly written in England. La Fontaine's fables of "The Drowning Woman," "The Wishes," "The Fox and the Cat," and one or two others not derived from Æsop, are to be found in this collection.

There are at least four other collections of fables of the thirteenth century bearing the name of "Ysopet," two of which have been printed by M. Robert.¹ Together with a large proportion of the Æsopic fables in a varied form, they contain several which are purely mediæval in their character, and many of these are highly characteristic and entertaining. They are full of that satirical spirit by which the monkish writers appear so often to have relieved their minds under the severe discipline of the cloister. The way in which the story of the Wolf keeping Lent is told in one of these "Ysopets," in the old French eight-syllabled verse, is as lively and humorous as anything in La Fontaine. The Wolf (who is here called Isengrin, as in the "Reynard" romances) was ill of the glanders, and made a vow to heaven that if he should but recover he would forswear the eating of flesh, and become one of the

¹ 'Fables Inédites.'

brethren of the Chartreuse. He soon got well, and on first taking his walks abroad he met a fine fat sheep. His mouth watered at the sight—but he remembered his vow. "Heaven bless you, Master Salmon!" quoth the Wolf, by way of greeting. The other assured him that he was no fish—would not venture into the water for his life; he was the son of a sheep, of very honest parentage—nothing more. "That is no matter to me," said the Wolf; "you have all the look of a salmon to my eyes, by St Siquat! and as a salmon I shall treat you." And so he ate him up on the spot.¹ There is an equally good story, in the same collection, of a country-woman who had commended her cow, which went out daily with others to the public pasture, to the special attention of every saint she could find in the calendar, and to each of whom she duly paid her devotions accordingly. One day the cow failed to come home as usual, and was nowhere to be heard of. The unfortunate owner took it very hard that all her guardians should thus have failed her, and expressed her grief and surprise, when next she went to her devotions, in terms of bitter remonstrance. Upon which St Peter appeared to her, and explained that if she had left the care of the cow to him solely—or indeed to any other of his fraternity—the animal would have been quite safe; but that in her case she had intrusted her business to so many, that each particular saint had probably considered himself justified in thinking that the others were looking after the cow. It must be allowed that this is a very impressive way of enforcing the moral that "what is everybody's business is nobody's."

¹ Robert, 'Fables Inédites,' ii. 487.

But it is more than probable that of Marie de France (as she is commonly called), or of these less-known “Ysopets,” or of any other collection of fables in the old Romance language, La Fontaine knew nothing. They had not yet been printed; and he was far too indolent to be suspected of making researches amongst old manuscripts which he would have found it very difficult to read. If he knew anything of their contents at all, it must have been from extracts, or from later versions of the same stories.

But besides these collections of Greek and Latin and early French fables, from which La Fontaine borrowed the skeletons and the characters of so many of his own, another source was at least open to him whence he may have drawn more or less—the poem or “romance” of “Reynard the Fox;” or rather the family of compositions in prose and verse which cluster round and almost conceal the original of that remarkable epic. Whether this original were French, German, or Flemish, it is not necessary here to discuss; but versions of it were current in France at least as early as the twelfth century, and allusions to it are frequent in early French writers. It occupies its distinct place in the genealogy, if one may so call it, of popular literature. It succeeded the romances of chivalry, which had so long formed almost exclusively the literary entertainment of a society which had few readers but very patient listeners, and it presented quite another view of social life and social questions. It was the product of the civilian and plebeian mind, as contrasted with the knightly and the military. In the romances of chivalry, the cycle of story in which Charlemagne or Arthur are the heroes, we have the glorification

of the knight and the noble : they live and move in a world quite above and distinct from the useful and peaceful occupations of life. The "churl" and the "villain," when they appear at all upon the scene, are merely the slaves and the tools, when they are not the prey and the sport, of the dominant class who are the sole actors in the drama. As to the animal world, excepting so far as beasts of chase are concerned, its life and habits are wholly ignored. In this remarkable epic of "Reynard" the whole is changed. The hero is no longer the king or the knight : it is the Fox—no very high type of character, it is true, but the representative of mind as opposed to matter ; of cunning, the armour of the weak, as opposed to physical strength ; the triumph of diplomacy over arms. It is, from one point of view, the meaner side of human life ; from another, the more real and practical. But what is chiefly to be noticed here in connection with the fables of La Fontaine, is that fantastic hierarchy, so to speak, introduced as recognised amongst animals. We have partial traces of this, no doubt, in classical fable ; but in this romance is the very foundation of the story. We have King Noble, the Lion, with the members of his Court ; Isengrin the Wolf ; Bruin the Bear, and his wife ; Belin the Ram, and Timers the Ass (who figure as the high priests of this imaginary realm), and a whole subject-community of lower characters. It is hardly possible but that La Fontaine should have been familiar with some of the French versions of the romance, though there is no distinct reference to it in his writings. It is from this source too, perhaps, rather than from the Indian fables ascribed to Pilpay, that he took the idea of linking his own fables together in a kind of unity which

does not exist in those of *Aesop* or *Phædrus*. These classical fables are isolated stories ; La Fontaine's are part of a continuous whole, in which the same characters constantly reappear. They form, as he himself expresses it, "a drama in a hundred acts." The persons of this drama are nearly the same as those in "*Reynard*," and present the same type of character. The fabulist had too much respect for monarchy to follow the romance in making the royal Lion the dupe of Reynard's artifices ; but in spite of the Lion's strength and majesty, the Fox is still very much the hero of the whole chain of fable, so far as success is in question. If the royal beast is not exactly his dupe, yet the Fox is a match for him, and retains his favour where others fail ; and the successful stratagem, the quick wit, the ready tongue, give him a supremacy over other animals far more striking than the mere brute force residing in the king. The Bear and the Wolf, too, maintain the same relative position in La Fontaine's fables as in "*Reynard the Fox*." The Bear is strong but stupid, an easy victim to his weaker but wiser fellow-courtier. The Wolf is a more formidable rival, but he, too, finds his master in the Fox. There are other features of characteristic resemblance between the story and the fables. In the romances of chivalry, woman is almost worshipped ; in "*Reynard the Fox*," she has become the object for raillery and satire. In one of the French versions of "*Reynard*," we have an account of the creation of the lower animals. Adam and Eve are given a rod with which they are to strike the earth when they have need of anything. Adam strikes first, and forth springs a sheep ; Eve strikes—"roughly"—and a wolf comes forth and devours it. And so the pair go on, till

the earth is filled with animal life; but all the creatures whom woman calls into being are more or less savage and harmful, while the man's productions are gentle and useful. This satire on woman, and especially upon married life, is very distinct, if not very frequent, in the pages of La Fontaine. So it is also with the spirit in which the Church and the monastic orders are treated. In the romances of chivalry both are spoken of with the highest respect. Though the Archbishop of Canterbury, in the Arthurian legend, is placed in very strange company, that of Queen Morgiana la Fay—one of the many traces of paganism surviving in the midst of Christianity—yet the offices of the Church are mentioned with reverence whenever they are mentioned at all, and the penitent knight is shrived by the pious hermit or retires into the cloister, without a hint of satire upon such a proceeding. In the tale of "The Fox," all this is changed. A tone of audacious rationalism prevails throughout, which shows how strongly the "protestant" spirit was working long before the Reformation was thought of, and how the lay intellect, even in those early days, revolted against the usurpations and corruptions of the Roman Church. Reynard's wickedness, whenever it takes the form of contempt of ecclesiastical authority, is plainly expected by the author to have an especial relish for his readers. When Reynard eats his confessor, the Hawk, our sympathy is evidently not asked for the bird of prey. When he requires the skin from the feet of his uncle the Wolf, and his aunt Hersinde the She-Bear, to make him strong shoes to go on his pilgrimage, and ironically promises them a share in the indulgences he shall thus procure, we have a blow aimed at the whole system of indul-

ences, which shows how the way had been already paved for Luther. When Belin the Ram, who is the king's chaplain, hesitates to give Reynard the usual blessing before he sets off as a pilgrim, even at the king's order, because he has been excommunicated by the Pope, we have a double stroke of satire, aimed at the Church generally, and at the papal supremacy in particular. Belin says that in matters ecclesiastical he never considers whether a thing be right or wrong, but only what his ecclesiastical superiors may say to him ; but the king insists, and the priest confers his blessing on the pilgrim, in defiance of the Pope. When Reynard offers to take the cross, and join the crusade, "No," says the king, "he will come back worse than he went—they always do." When he is excommunicated by the arch-priest (Timers, the Ass, who "has an excellent strong voice"), there is a bitter contempt discernible under the amusing burlesque of the ecclesiastical sentence, and the manner in which the culprit receives it :—

"Unhappy wretch that I shall be,
Since the Church excommunicates me !
I shall never more eat bread—
Unless I be an hungered ;
Boil my pot shall never more—
Unless it be set the fire afore."

The monastic orders are the subject of even more contemptuous sarcasm. So popular and powerful (in spite of his excommunication) does Reynard become, that the various religious bodies are all anxious to enrol him amongst their members. First the Jacobins solicit him ; but he gives them, by way of substitute, his eldest son, who speedily becomes general of the Order. The Cordel-

iers make proposals to him ; to them he gives his second son, whose promotion is equally rapid. Then he will himself turn hermit, as the most perfect form of religious self-abnegation. But it appears that he had entirely mistaken the conditions of hermit-life. He had always thought that these good men enjoyed the fat of the land ; but he finds, to his astonishment and disgust, that they live upon herbs, and wild honey, and water. A hermitage on such conditions will not suit him at all. The Knights Hospitallers and Templars are both anxious to elect him as their general ; and the contention between the two Orders becomes so keen, that it is carried before the Pope and the College of Cardinals, who at last propose to cut Reynard in two and assign half of him to each Order. This settlement of the question Reynard by no means approves of, and succeeds in effecting a compromise more agreeable to himself. He will wear a robe of two colours — parti per pale, as the heralds term it—and he will shave half his beard and let the other half grow ; so will he be Templar on one side and Hospitaller on the other, and accept the generalship of both Orders, and govern them both excellently well. And so he does, the story assures us—“so long as the revenues are good.”

A very similar vein of satire runs through the fables of La Fontaine. The Church is touched lightly, and, upon the whole, with good-humour ; but against the monks he shows a real animosity. The moral of “The Rat who turned Hermit” is as caustic as anything in “Reynard the Fox.”

THE RAT TURNED HERMIT—(vii. 3).

“A certain Rat, weary of this world’s strife,
(So the Levantines in their legend say),

Into a large Dutch cheese, one day,
 Retired from public life :
 The solitude was most profound,
 Extending over the whole cheese's round.
 Within, our hermit fixed his cell,
 And worked with teeth and claws so hard and well,
 He quickly had provided ample store
 Of food, safe shelter—what could rat want more ?
 He soon grew sleek and fat ;
 When one turns hermit, Heaven takes care of that.
 He had not long embraced his new vocation,
 When one fine day,
 From the Rat people came a deputation,
 Entreating of the saint, to help them on their way,
 Some small donation :
 For they were journeying forth in search of aid
 Against a fierce attack the Cats had made ;
 Ratopolis was under strict blockade ;
 And, what was worse,
 So low their treasury was, they had to start
 Without a penny in their purse.
 Some very small assistance on his part
 Was all they asked ; for, he must understand,
 In a few days, allies would be at hand.
 ' My friends,' the Solitary said,
 ' To this world's interests I have long been dead ;
 Nay, of what use
 Could I be in such strait—a poor recluse ?
 Except my prayers—they're yours, of course, you
 know—
 May Heaven preserve you from those Cats ! and so
 Pray take my blessing, friends, and go.'
 Not a word more,
 But shut his door.

Who does the Reader think I had in mind,
 In telling how this Rat, in terms unkind,

Bade his poor brethren unassisted go?
 A monk? Excuse me, no—not in the least;
 I mean a Dervish of the East:
 A monk is always liberal, we know."

La Fontaine can see in the monk or the hermit little more than a hypocrite. He represents him in other fables by the Cat. The Rabbit and the Weasel, when they fall out, agree to carry their dispute before their neighbour, Raminagrobis. "This was a Cat, who led the life of a devout hermit—in fact, a Cat turned Chattemite—a saint of a cat, well-furred, sleek and fat; an experienced arbitrator in all difficult cases." And Puss—"like a good apostle," without waiting to hear the case, sets the litigants at one again by devouring the pair of them.¹ So in another fable, when the Cat, going out very early in the morning on one of her usual predatory excursions, gets caught in a net which has been set at the foot of the hollow tree where she lives, she tells her fellow-lodger the Rat (who has a hole there too) that she was on her way to early prayers—"as every devout cat uses to do in the morning."

The fables for which, in their medieval form, he might have been indebted to the different branches of the "Reynard" romance—or which are at least to be found there—are the Man and the Snake; the Wolf and the Crane; the Fox and the Crow; the Lion's Hunting-party; the Jackdaw and the Peacocks; the Eagle and the Owl; Unjust Complaints against Fortune (vii. 14); the Wolf and the Fox; the Fox, Wolf, and Horse; the Town and Country Mouse; the Ass and the Lapdog; the Oak and the Rush; and the Man, the Horse, and the Stag.

¹ vii. 16.

There are two or three others in the romance which do not appear in La Fontaine.

The first six books of his Fables contain not more than one or two of distinctly oriental origin, though several of them are derived from a common stock ; as, for instance, "The Ass and the Lapdog," which the *Æsop* collection and the *Reynard* romances have in common, is found also in Indian fable as "The Screech-Owl and Parroquet." But in the interval between the publication of these and the latter half of his work, he had evidently made acquaintance with some French version of the fables known as those of Pilpay—or more properly Bidpai. This Indian sage is as shadowy a personage as *Æsop*. The conjectural date assigned to him varies from two thousand to two hundred and fifty years before our era. His popular name is said to be really no name at all, but only a descriptive appellation meaning "the beloved physician," who was a Brahmin called Vishnu-Sarma—if that name be not also a mere *nom de plume*. His fables are contained in a kind of allegorical romance in the Sanscrit language—'Pancha-Tantra,' 'Five Collections of Tales,' of which there is a later form called the 'Hitopadesa.' It consists of fables loosely connected by narrative. Portions of it were translated into Latin about the end of the fifteenth century, and thence into French by Gilbert Gaulmin (assuming the style of David Sahid of Ispahan) ; and this, or some of the more recent translations, La Fontaine was almost certainly acquainted with, as several of his later fables appear to come direct from this source.¹

¹ The Animals dying of the Plague ; the Cat, the Weasel, and the Rabbit (vii. 16) ; the Bear and the Gardener (viii. 10) ; the Two

The moral of these fables is such as we might have expected if their origin be really Indian. It is no moral at all, according to our ideas of morality. The lesson suggested is more or less a selfish one: it is the glorification of cunning. Unsuspecting benevolence is presented to us only in the character of a dupe. We have a fair example of this character in a story which is found, as one of a series, in the 'Pancha-Tantra'—"The Brahmin, the Crocodile, the Tree, the Cow, and the Fox"—and which reappears in La Fontaine as the "The Man and the Snake." It has evidently a common origin with the better-known fable ascribed to *Aesop*, and also adapted by La Fontaine—"The Countryman and the Serpent."

A certain Brahmin was making a pilgrimage to bathe in the sacred waters of the Ganges. On his road he had to pass near a river, and stopped to make his usual ablutions. While thus engaged, a Crocodile approached him, and asked whence he came and whither he was going? When told that the Brahmin was on his way to the Ganges, the Crocodile begged that he would take him with him, as there was too little room for him in the stream where he now was. The Brahmin consented, and stowed away the reptile in his travelling-bag. When they arrived on the banks of the Ganges, the Brahmin opened the bag, and showed the Crocodile the sacred river. The creature begged him to complete his kind action by carrying him a little way into the stream,

Friends (viii. 11); the Falcon and the Capon; the Wolf and the Hunter; the Faithless Trustee (ix. 1); the Two Pigeons; the Husband, the Wife, and the Thief; the Tortoise and the Ducks; the Fish and the Cormorant, and at least half the subjects of the tenth book, are traced by M. Robert to Bidpai.

and, when once more in his natural element, seized the Brahmin by the leg. The good man expostulated, and charged the Crocodile with base ingratitude ; upon which the reptile retorted that gratitude, as practised in those days, consisted in devouring one's benefactors, and that man was a notorious instance of it. It was at last agreed that the question should be referred to three arbitrators in succession, and if they decided against the Brahmin, he should submit to his fate. The first to whom they appealed was a Mango-tree, who at once gave judgment against the man : he ate of its fruits, enjoyed its shade, and then, when it grew old and past bearing, lopped its branches, and at last cut it down, and even rooted it up. The second to whom the parties submitted their case was a Cow, old and lean, who was lying unattended by the bank of the river. She without hesitation pronounced to the same effect. "Man uses me," said she, "to till his fields, he feeds on my milk, I give him calves ; and lo, when I am old and no longer serviceable to him, he leaves me here to be the prey of wild beasts." One more such verdict only was required to seal the fate of the Brahmin. The next whom they met was a Fox, to whom the same query was put—Was it permissible to requite a benefactor with evil ? The Fox showed himself a most upright and painstaking judge. He was apparently impressed by the Crocodile's arguments ; but before he would give any opinion, he must understand exactly all the circumstances of the case, and especially in what fashion the fellow-travellers had made the journey. The Crocodile, by way of illustration, got into the bag again, and the Brahmin lifted it on his back. The Fox beckoned him to follow, and when

they were a little way from the bank, bade him set his burden down, took up a great stone, and smashed the Crocodile's head as he lay. "Fool!" then said he to the Brahmin, "learn from your present escape to have no friendly relations with rascals." Then—concludes the story, with a charming completeness of detail—the Fox summoned his family, and they made an excellent meal of the Crocodile.

We are spared any moral in the original *apologue*. In La Fontaine's version,—"*The Man and the Snake*,"—the Man entices the Serpent into the sack with the fixed intention of killing him, "guilty or not guilty," and it is the Snake who contends that man is of all living things the most notoriously ungrateful, and appeals successively to the Cow, the Ox, and the Tree, who all, as in the Eastern original, give judgment against the Man. Whereupon he cuts the matter short by beating sack and Snake against a wall till the Snake is killed; and the moral is—that it is of no use to argue with those in power, unless at a very safe distance. It is the moral that repeats itself over and over again in La Fontaine's pages,—a far more cynical view of human nature, as it is a more hopeless view of the fruitless struggle of justice against force, than any which we find in Eastern *apologue*.

CHAPTER III.

LIFE OF LA FONTAINE.

JEAN DE LA FONTAINE was born in 1621, in the little town of Château-Thierry in Champagne. His father held what might be called the rangership of the district ("master of waters and forests"), which brought him in some moderate income. The La Fontaines had even some pretensions to nobility, as the form of their name would imply, and in certain family documents the son had been styled "esquire," an assumption for which he incurred the penalty of 2000 livres under a commission issued by Colbert for proceeding against unlicensed bearers of such titles. He seems to have got off, however, by the influence of the Duc de Bouillon, seigneur of Château-Thierry, with whose family he was always on intimate terms. His education was somewhat irregular, carried on at country schools, latterly at Rheims, where he acquired a fair knowledge of Latin; and of this city he always retained a pleasant recollection. Some religious books which fell in his way seem to have turned his thoughts towards the Church, and at twenty years of age he entered the Oratory as a student, and was thence transferred in a few months to the semin-

ary of St Magloire. But he found the life utterly unsuited to his habits or his taste, and before he was twenty-two he left it, and got himself married, entirely to the satisfaction of his father, who resigned his rangership in his favour. But the young wife was not quite sixteen, and though irreproachable in character, little fitted to manage either her household or her husband; and young La Fontaine had as little vocation for matrimony as for the Church—or, indeed, for the management of woods and forests, for even of the ordinary terms of woodcraft he always professed his ignorance. The young pair never seem to have quarrelled, but there was an “incompatibility” of some kind, and the husband led a very independent and erratic existence, a state of things which the wife bore with great equanimity. An utter incapacity for the ordinary business of life, an indifference to its obligations and restraints, and a want of self-control of any kind, belonged to his character from his earliest years to his latest, and all kinds of stories were told of his strange behaviour. When he was in Paris on some urgent family business, his father intrusted him with an important errand in the matter, and awaited his return; but Jean had met some old companions, went with them to the theatre, and forgot all about the business until the next morning. On another occasion he was riding from Paris to Château-Thierry with a packet of important papers secured to his saddle-bow; the fastening gave way without his knowledge, and the packet was picked up by a traveller who followed him on the road, and who rode up and asked him if he had lost anything. La Fontaine assured him that he had not, and was only convinced by the produc-

tion of the papers. It may be easily conceived how he would acquit himself as the master of a household.

The poetic gifts which were to compensate, in the eyes of society, for so many defects of character, are said to have been first awakened by his hearing an ode of Malherbe read aloud, which would imply that very little general literature had previously come in his way. From that moment Malherbe's somewhat affected verse became a passion with him, until a wise friend directed his attention to Horace. He had gained a competent knowledge of Latin at school and at the Oratory, and Horace charmed him upon better acquaintance even more than Malherbe. From Horace he passed to Virgil: he gratefully acknowledges both as his masters and teachers, and their thoughts and diction are constantly reproduced in his own verse. He soon carried his reading still further in the same direction; and though he knew nothing of Greek, he had read Plato and Plutarch carefully in translations. The Abbé d'Olivet says he had seen La Fontaine's copies of those authors, largely underscored and covered with manuscript notes, embodying, in many cases, the moral and political maxims set forth in his fables. "Where, among all the sages and the geniuses of our own age," he says in a letter to Huet, "shall I find a single one that approaches Plato?" In his wide acquaintance with the old classical writers, and in his love for them, no Frenchman of his times surpassed him except Fénelon. "We cannot go beyond the ancients," he says; "they have left us nothing for our share, but the glory of following them worthily."¹ His general reading was also exten-

¹ Note to Fable 15, Book i.

sive for those days : Tasso, Ariosto, Boccacio, and Machiavel ; Descartes, Rabelais, Voiture, Villon, Marot,—with all these, we know from himself, he was familiar, and probably they were only the representative names of a larger company of literary acquaintances. His admiration of the ancients did not prevent his full appreciation of his favourite French writers, to whom he is always ready to acknowledge his obligations : he calls himself, in a letter to M. de St Evremond, “the scholar of Rabelais, Voiture, and Clement Marot.” His enthusiasm for some one particular author upon first introduction was, like so much else in his character, amusingly childlike. It was so, in his early life, in the case of Malherbe and Horace ; it was the same in later days, when he had got hold for the first time of the ‘Book of Baruch,’ which his friend Racine had put into his hands one day to keep him quiet in church. “What a genius Baruch was !” he said to his friend ; and for some days afterwards he kept earnestly inquiring of any one he happened to meet in the street—sometimes, one may conceive, rather to their embarrassment—whether they had read Baruch ?

He began to write verses—chiefly love-songs—before his marriage, and soon became known in private circles as a successful author of *vers de société*, which were handed about in manuscript, after the fashion of the day, and won for the young poet a considerable reputation. It would appear, from some of the letters which passed between Racine and himself, that a kind of small literary club (*Académie*, he calls it) had been formed at Château-Thierry, of which De Maucroix, Pintrel, and himself were the chief members. A letter from Racine

in 1662 sends a little poem, with a request to know what the "Academy" thinks of it. His first publication, which was not until he was thirty-three, was a translation into French verse of Terence's comedy of "The Eunuch," but it has no particular merit, and probably attracted little attention. At any rate, it does not seem to have encouraged him to venture hastily into print again, for more than ten years elapsed before his next public appearance as an author.

The year before he gave his first literary offspring to the world, his wife had presented him with a son; an event which does not seem to have added to his happiness, or to have drawn closer their very independent conjugal relations. The father appears to have taken very little interest in the boy, except so far as to provide him with a fair education; and he was left to the care of his mother and her family until he was fourteen, when M. de Harlay, Procureur-general, undertook the father's duty (as some good friend always did), and took charge of the lad. A story was current among La Fontaine's friends, that when on one occasion he met his son in society after he was grown up, and was asked if he knew the young man, he replied that he "thought he had seen him somewhere before." Another version is, that La Fontaine showed himself much pleased with the young stranger's bearing and conversation, and when told it was his son, remarked cordially that "he was very glad to hear it." That he should have wholly ignored the duties of the father of a family is no more than we should have expected from his general character. "I have never envied any man such a position," he says

himself, in pointing the moral of one of his fables;¹ but one is rather surprised to find apparently wanting, in a man of his kind feelings, easy good-humour, and gentle disposition, the love of children which generally accompanies such a temperament. But several expressions in the fables tend to show that the great fable-writer, for whom the nature and habits of the whole world of lower animals had such a strong interest, regarded children rather on their troublesome and mischievous side, and that for him they had little attraction. It is “a little rascal of a child,” with its sling, that nearly kills, out of pure mischief, one of the “Two Pigeons” in his fable; “that age of life,” says the author, “knows nothing of pity;” an observation not the less cynical because it contains a certain amount of truth. “Childhood loves nothing,” he says in another fable; an assertion which assuredly finds less excuse in fact. But the easy good-nature of La Fontaine was too much that of a selfish bachelor; and although, as we shall see, he was capable of strong and even romantic attachments, he could not submit to the demands made upon his time and patience by wife or children.

Whether the sudden intrusion of an infant (probably unexpected, after a married life of ten years) increased his repugnance to anything like domestic life, or whether the coincidence of events was accidental, he deserted his home at Château-Thierry, about this time, almost entirely for Paris. Thither, indeed, his wife accompanied him at the first; but she soon returned alone to the little provincial town. The husband, meanwhile, was making a

powerful friend. He had been introduced by one of his wife's family (Jacques Jannart, who had married her aunt) to Fouquet, the magnificent and unscrupulous Minister of Finance, who took a fancy to the poet and his verses, and gave him a pension of a thousand livres, the sole consideration for which was that he should furnish his patron with an ode or ballad once in every quarter. This obligation he seems to have punctually discharged; but he also dedicated to Fouquet, a few years later, the longest and most ambitious of his poems, on the classical subject of "Adonis." The work was as yet only in manuscript, and was not printed till 1669,—eleven years after its production. It may be dismissed at once in very few words, as cold, monotonous, and artificial, and as adding nothing to the permanent reputation of its author. At the time of its publication, however, it had considerable success in spite of its faults: the reproduction of classical subjects, and the imitation of classical imagery and diction, were the fashion of the day, and the "Adonis" was the only work deserving the name of poem which had as yet been published in France. Its author was encouraged to follow it up, in the next year, with another piece in the same style, but shorter, entitled "Psyche,"—being a poor imitation of the work of the same name by the Greek writer Apuleius. But the date of publication, in the case of both poems (and probably of composition also in the case of "Psyche") was, as has been said, at a much later period of the author's life.

Long before that time, the powerful patron, to whom the manuscript "Adonis" had been dedicated, had fallen into disgrace. Fouquet had offended his young master,

Louis XIV., by his ambition, his lavish display of a wealth whose sources were questionable, and probably in other matters with which we have here nothing to do. He had built and embellished with almost regal magnificence at Vaux-le-Vicomte on the Seine, some ten leagues from Paris, a palace surpassing in splendour the royal residences at St Germain and at Fontainebleau, and which probably gave Louis the first impulse to his future great works at Versailles. La Fontaine had set himself the task of describing the attractions of Fouquet's new mansion and pleasure-grounds in a poem, to which he gave the name of "Songe de Vaux." He took three years in its composition, and never got beyond some fragments (afterwards published) when the fall of his patron put a stop to the work. It is chiefly remarkable as containing what was possibly his first fable—a very poor one. In a letter to Fouquet, accompanying a presentation copy of his Fables, he says, "It was you that first made me a fable-teller, in bidding me compose the "Songe de Vaux."

It was immediately after a grand entertainment given by the Minister there in 1662 in honour of the king, and at which Louis was present, that the host was suddenly arrested, charged with corrupt practices, of which there seem to have been proofs in abundance (indeed, in his high office, such conduct was the rule rather than the exception), and imprisoned in the castle of Amboise. His ruin was complete, and involved many of his subordinates and friends; and it is to the lasting credit of La Fontaine that he adhered, closely and boldly, in this day of adversity, to the man whose bounty he had enjoyed, and whose hand had been the first held out to

encourage him. He wrote at once to his dear friend Francois de Maucroix, canon of Rheims (where they had probably been schoolfellows), in the following words, admirable both in simplicity and in expression :—

“ I can say nothing to you, my dear friend, as to what you wrote about my own affairs ; they do not touch me so nearly as what has just befallen the Minister. He has been arrested, and the king is violent against him, going so far as to declare that he has in his hands documentary evidence sufficient to hang him. Ah ! if he does, he will be far more cruel than his enemies, inasmuch as he has no interest, as they have, in being unjust.”

La Fontaine did also what little he could in defence of his patron. He wrote an elegy addressed to the “ Nymphes de Vaux,”—the guardians of those pleasant shades from which their master had been torn—in which he charged them, if King Louis should ever visit their haunts, to plead with him on behalf of the unhappy Orontes—the poetical alias which he gives to the ex-Minister ; and he took care that this should come under the notice of the king. He subsequently composed an ode addressed to Louis personally, in which he begged him to spare the life of Fouquet. But the prisoner himself, to whom he had sent a copy of the ode in manuscript, wrote to request his friend not to make an appeal on his behalf, the language of which seemed to admit his guilt. La Fontaine’s reply is gracefully worded :—

“. . . You say that I am asking, in too humiliating terms, a boon which one ought to despise. Such a sentiment, sir, well becomes you ; and assuredly one who regards life with such indifference can in no way deserve death. But perhaps you have not taken into consideration the fact that it is I who speak,—I who am asking a favour which is of

more value in my eyes than in yours. There are no terms too humble, too apologetic, too pathetic, or too earnest, for me to feel bound to employ in this appeal. When I have to introduce you in person on the scene, I will take care to put into your mouth language corresponding to the magnanimity of your spirit. But allow me to say that you do not show sufficient anxiety for a life so valuable as yours."

One of the sub-intendants who found himself involved in the disgrace and ruin of his chief was Jacques Jannart, already mentioned as connected with the young poet by marriage. The affectionate intercourse which appears to have always existed between them (*La Fontaine* addresses him as "my dear uncle") seems to show that Madame *La Fontaine*'s family did not consider that the young husband was very much to blame for the existing state of things. Jannart was banished for a while to Limoges; and thither *La Fontaine*, who had always found a friend in him, followed with a view of cheering his exile. On the way, he had to pass the castle of Amboise, where *Fouquet* was now confined, and treated with a cruel severity, every window of his prison chamber being blocked up, and light admitted only at the roof. *La Fontaine* had hoped for an interview; but the sentry to whom he applied "had not the key,"—or at least made that excuse. He declares in a letter to his wife, that he stood a long time in meditation at the door, imagining to himself all the miseries of his friend's condition; and that he "could not tear himself from the spot until nightfall." There is no good reason to doubt the literal truth of the statement: such a manifestation of feeling was very French, and therefore very like *La Fontaine*: possibly, too, in his case, his well-known

absence of mind might have had something to do with this long and melancholy reverie.

He wrote frequent and kindly letters to his wife during his journey and his stay at Limoges, entering into pleasant gossiping details of his daily life and proceedings. These letters are interspersed, as his letters usually were, with light and graceful verses. He appears to make her quite the recipient of his confidences, describing to her, in almost every letter, the impressions made upon his very susceptible feelings by the various pretty women whom he had the pleasure of meeting by the way. He is accused of showing throughout this correspondence a want of affection for his wife; and certainly the letters are not such as would be written by any husband to an absent wife where there existed a deep and mutual attachment. But it must be remembered that such attachment rarely did exist, and was rarely looked for, in a French marriage of the seventeenth century. The curious feature in the correspondence is the proof it affords of the very good terms the young couple were on, in spite of the remarkable elasticity of the tie that connected them. La Fontaine writes to his wife very much as he might have written to any other lady who he knew would take an interest in his movements, and in whom he took an interest himself. He tells her, in one of the earlier letters, that it was really very good in one of his indolent nature to write to her at all; more especially when he who was so fond of sleep, as she knew—was sitting up till one o'clock to do it, and had to continue his journey early in the morning. "Who will talk to me," he says, "after this, of husbands who sacrifice themselves to their wives? I claim to surpass them all."

The opening of the first letter supplies a hint of some deficiencies in the young wife which may perhaps explain her having failed to attach her husband more closely :—

" You never would read any travels but those of the ' Knights of the Round Table ;' but my travels well deserve that you should read them. For all that, you will find in them matter hardly suited to your taste ; it will be my business to dress it up so as to give you pleasure, and yours to praise my good intentions in the matter, even if they be not attended with success. It may possibly even come to pass that if you can enjoy this narrative of mine, you may afterwards learn to appreciate more serious reading. You neither play, nor work, nor busy yourself about your household ; and except the hours which your good friends and neighbours bestow on you out of charity, you find amusement in nothing but romances. . . . Consider, I pray you, what a good thing it will be if even in this light and jocular fashion of mine I accustom you to read history, either of places or of persons ; it will be something to preserve you from *ennui* all your life."

The terms in which the writer reminds his wife of her love for novels and gossip have been considered somewhat harsh : possibly her indolent habits had given him some annoyance—for those who are indolent themselves are naturally intolerant of that fault in those about them ; but no expressions in this or other letters leave the impression that he wrote in an unkindly spirit. At the close of this letter he sends his love to the little "*marmot*" (the child was now ten years old), and bids the mother tell him that, if he is good, he will perhaps bring him home a little girl to play with. In another letter he explains that he will leave the description of the castle of Richelieu till another time, because it will

give him the opportunity of asking more frequently for news of his wife, and of economising a source of amusement in his letters, which may, he hopes, enable her to pass the days of his “exile” from her less wearily. It is true that he does not seem to find, or profess to find, this exile very wearisome to himself, or dream for a moment that his wife should expect him to find it so : “I walk, I sleep, and pass my time with the ladies who call upon us :” and he describes the attractions of some among them with a frankness which we must hope was appreciated by a French wife of those days more than it would probably be by an English one of the present.

He remained in this “exile” at Limoges something less than a year, when he returned to Château-Thierry. But it was not to lead a very domestic life. The seigneur of the place, the Duc de Bouillon, was then absent on a campaign against the Turks ; and his young duchess, a niece of Cardinal Mazarin, a clever and lively woman, found La Fontaine’s company a great relief to her country solitude. He spent much of his time at the chateau, and when the Duchess removed to Paris on the following spring to await her accouchement, it did not require much persuasion to induce La Fontaine to take up his quarters there also. His wife accompanied him, and there appears to have been no scandal as to his relations with the Duchess. But the capital had not so much attraction for Madame La Fontaine as for her husband, and it cannot be supposed that she enjoyed there very much of his society. She soon went back to the retirement of Château-Thierry ; and he never returned again to his home there except on flying visits, made generally for the purpose of selling some portion of the little family

property to meet his current expenses. At last he sold the old house itself, and his wife lived from that time in a house in the town, lent to her by the Duc de Bouillon.

In the capital, besides the general society to which his friendship with the Duchess would give him ready introduction, he formed one of a little circle of intimate friends who were to make themselves great names in literature, though most of them were as yet comparatively unknown. These were Molière, who, though a year younger than La Fontaine, had already written and acted in some of his best plays; Racine and Boileau, both considerably younger, though with the former, once a clerical student like himself, he had a long previous acquaintance; and Claude Chapelle, a man of wealth and leisure, who preferred the unrestrained and pleasant companionship (it would be scarcely fair to call it Bohemianism) of his literary friends to the greater and gayer world, to which he had easy access. He is said to have supplied Molière with some of the best scenes in his comedies; and he enjoyed reading his account of his own travels, which he soon afterwards published, to such an appreciative audience. Here is La Fontaine's description of their meetings, which were usually held in Boileau's apartments:—

“Four friends, whose acquaintance had begun upon Mount Parnassus, held a kind of club, which I might call an academy had their number been larger, and had they regarded learning as much as enjoyment. The first thing they did was to banish from among them all formal conversation, and everything that smacked of academic discussion. When they were met together, and had talked enough about their amusements, if chance led them to touch on any question of science

or of literature, they took advantage of the occasion; but at the same time without dwelling too long on one subject, but flying off purposely to another, like bees who meet with divers kinds of flowers on their way. Envy, malice, or party spirit, found no voice among them. They adored the works of the ancients, yet did not refuse to those of the moderns such praise as was their due. They spoke of their own performances with modesty, and gave each other honest advice, whenever one of them happened to be seized with the malady of the age, and wrote a book—which happened but seldom.”¹

He goes on to say that Polyphile (“the man of many friends,”—or perhaps rather “of many tastes,”—under which name he not inaptly introduces himself) was the greatest offender among them in this respect. Neither the great dramatist, nor the future critic and satirist, was as yet so well known upon “Mount Parnassus” as the young poet of society, though he was content for the present to be known chiefly in manuscript. But it is curious that within two years the four friends—Racine, Boileau, Chapelle, and La Fontaine—all made their first serious appearance in print. They must have formed a very pleasant literary brotherhood, and the friendship which could stand the test of free mutual criticism must have been of no ordinary complexion. It went even further than this: the friends extended this corrective discipline to each other’s moral habits. Chapelle, with money always at his command, and with a wider circle of acquaintance outside this little band of writers, was much too fond of wine; and Boileau took him to task upon the subject. Once, when these remonstrances had been pressed earnestly during a walk, Chapelle persuaded his friend to enter a wine-shop with him, and to continue

¹ Introd. to ‘Les Amours de Psyche.’

the argument there. It grew more spirited on both sides over a first and second bottle, and Chapelle was very careful to replenish his friend's glass. The result was that the moral lecturer (whose head was probably not so well seasoned as his pupil's), before he left the place, furnished an example in awkward contrast with his precepts. It is said that from that time he wisely discontinued his attempts to reclaim Chapelle ; but afterwards he and Racine took upon themselves the proverbially hopeless office of trying to set right La Fontaine's relations with his wife, which appear to have now become more distant than ever. She had retired, as has been said, to their house in the country, and there had been a formal separation of goods and chattels. The two friends persuaded the husband to make a purpose journey to Château-Thierry to see her, and to effect, if possible, some kind of reconciliation. He went, and was told that his wife had gone to attend evening prayers ; whereupon he proceeded at once to sup with a friend in the neighbourhood. The visit extended to two days, at the end of which he returned to Paris without any further attempt at an interview with Madame La Fontaine. The probability is that, as on other occasions, he had entirely forgotten the object of his journey,—though he did not give this explanation to his friends. There is, however, another version of this story, which has the authority of one of La Fontaine's granddaughters. Her account was that on this occasion there was a conspiracy on the part of his friends in the neighbourhood, who handed the too facile guest on from one house to another, and so delayed the intended interview with his wife ; that several days of very bad weather followed, which still

kept him from going to see her ; and that then he had to return to Paris to attend a meeting of the Academy. She also maintained that the relations between her grandparents had always been more kindly than was generally supposed ; that he frequently paid his wife long visits at Château-Thierry ; and that Racine and Despreaux (Boileau) sometimes accompanied him.¹ The husband and wife met at least once again some years after the misadventure just mentioned, when some kind of formal reconciliation seems to have taken place. She survived him thirteen years.

In the little circle of congenial friends which surrounded him in Paris, La Fontaine was always the spoilt and petted child, as he was throughout his life, in whatever society he found himself. He took no care of his own affairs, and other people felt bound to take care of him. He had odd ways of his own, to which others accommodated themselves. There must have been some great charm about him, which carried away men and women alike ; for, as is so seldom the case, he was as privileged a favourite with one sex as with the other. Racine and the other friends who have been named were accustomed to speak of him among themselves as "*le bonhomme*,"—a term but imperfectly Englished by "the good fellow." They made all sorts of jokes upon his continual absence of mind : he would sit sometimes in a fit of perfect abstraction, looking, it was said, like an idiot. Racine and Boileau were on one occasion inclined to carry their jests on this subject rather far. "Those two gentlemen," said Molière to another of the company, "may plume themselves as

¹ Lacroix.

much as they please, but they will never throw our good fellow there into the shade." It is more easy to understand the appreciation by a few intimate friends of a character such as La Fontaine's, than his ready acceptance and great popularity in general society. Most accounts represent him as having no conversational powers, making a bungle of such stories as he told, blurting out the most awkward speeches, and much given to fits of silence which were no less awkward for his entertainers. "He would either not talk at all," says one of his contemporaries, "or would talk about Plato." The various stories that were currently told of his social eccentricities could not all have been inventions. When one of his many acquaintances had invited two or three friends specially to meet him and enjoy his conversation, he remained utterly dumb during the whole time of dinner (though he "ate and drank like any four," says one of the party), and afterwards went quietly to sleep. When he awoke late in the evening, he began to apologise, which the company politely assured him was quite unnecessary, after which he was silent again. "He might possibly in imagination be animating a frog, or a fox, or a grasshopper," continues the narrator, "but to all appearance he was a mere machine without a soul. At last we pitched him into a *fiacre*, and bade him adieu for ever." At a supper given by Boileau, whose brother, a doctor of the Sorbonne, was present, the conversation turned upon St Augustine, on whom the divine pronounced an elaborate eulogy. La Fontaine had been meanwhile lost in one of his deep reveries, but did not wish it to be supposed that he had been inattentive. He roused himself, and asked Dr Boileau, "Did he really

think Augustine was cleverer than Rabelais?" The Sorbonnist looked at him for a few moments from head to foot: "Take care, M. La Fontaine," said he, "you have put on one of your stockings inside out,"—as in fact he had. Getting tired of his company at an entertainment given by an ostentatious host, who had invited the popular author chiefly as a "lion," he took his departure early on the plea that he had to attend a meeting of the Academy. When a too matter-of-fact friend looked at his watch, and assured him that he would find himself there much too soon—"Ah," said La Fontaine, "but I shall take the longest way."

A certain amount of awkwardness in general society is not uncommon to men of genius, and by no means incompatible with the power of gaining the warmest affection of personal friends. La Bruyère is well understood to have had La Fontaine in his mind when he drew the following sketch:—

"A man appears heavy, dull, and stupid: he does not know how to talk, or to relate what he has just seen. But let him set to work to write, and we have a model of good narrative: he can make beasts speak, and trees, and even stones, and all things that have no voice. There is in his writings nothing but ease and elegance, and the most natural grace and delicacy."¹

The sketch might almost equally well have been meant for Goldsmith—

"Who wrote like an angel, and talked like poor Poll," and whose character had very much in common with the Frenchman's. But there was another light in which La

¹ "Jugements," 55.

Fontaine appeared to those who knew him well, and the remarks attributed to his friend the Marquis de Sable are no doubt as true, from that point of view, as those of La Bruyère from the other :—

“ He was like one of those plain vases without ornament which contain treasures of infinite value within. He took no pains with his person, he was always very simply dressed ; he had a heavy look about the face. Yet, when one looked at him a little more attentively, one found expression in his eyes ; and a certain liveliness which even age had not been able to extinguish, made one see that he was anything but what he appeared to be. It is also true that among those who did not know him or did not suit him he was gloomy and absent, and that even with those who pleased him he was sometimes cold at the beginning of the conversation. But when he began to be interested, and took his part in the discussion, it was no longer the absent dreamer ; it was a man who spoke much and well, who in quoting the ancients gave them a new charm ; it was a philosopher, but whose philosophy was that of a man of the world ; in a word, it was La Fontaine, and the La Fontaine of the Fables.”¹

The Abbé Barthélémy calls him “ a poetical Brutus, who put on the appearance of a simpleton (*le bonhomme*) in order to conceal his good sense.”

Yet, in spite of all these sins against the laws and habits of good society (or was it, in some degree, because of them ?), he made for himself friends in no ordinary sense of the word ; friends who really loved him for himself, furthered his interests, supplied his wants, and made a home in their houses for the man to whom a

¹ “Portrait par M. X—,” prefixed to Mad. Ulrich’s ‘Œuvres Posthumes de La Fontaine.’

home of his own was so unnecessary and embarrassing a possession.

It was in the second year of his residence in Paris, when he was already forty-four years of age, that he published the first portion of his ‘Tales and Novels;’ a volume of stories in familiar verse, drawn chiefly from Italian sources. Many of these had been already published separately at earlier dates, and had been sufficiently popular. Their licentious character is well known, and was unhappily no bar whatever to their popularity even in the highest and most refined circles, although here and there a voice was raised in reprehension, and the king himself professed to be offended by their publication. A new instalment of these ‘Tales,’ published by their author at a later date, was actually laid under interdict by the police censorship, as having been printed without privilege or permission, and as dangerous to public morals. But we have to deal with La Fontaine, in these pages, simply as the great French fable-writer; and in that character he is entirely free from the stain of immorality which rests on the author of the ‘Contes et Nouvelles,’ which it is necessary only thus briefly to notice. His first volume of Fables made its appearance three years later, in 1668, and met with great success, though his work was yet not so thoroughly appreciated as it has been by later generations of readers. This first series contains six books only, and the fables consist, for the most part, of happy versions and adaptations from *Æsop* and *Phædrus*. He claims for them nothing more; for in his dedication to the little Dauphin, then between six and seven years old, he says, “I sing the heroes of whom *Æsop* is the father.” Many of these fables had

already circulated privately amongst his friends, and were now valued none the less as being old acquaintances.

It was soon after this that the author lost his earliest and most influential patrons. The Duchess-dowager of Orleans, to whom he had been appointed gentleman of the chamber, died: the Duc de Bouillon was exiled. But new protectors arose for him, now as always. The great Condé supplied him with money, and Madame de la Sablière gave him a home, which continued open to him for twenty years. Young, pretty, rich, and accomplished—clever without any affectation of learning (she is said to have been a fair mathematician and Greek scholar), she delighted in opening her house, and the refined circle in which she moved, to the men of genius who needed such encouragement. François Bernier, “the handsome philosopher” (of the Epicurean sort), but better known for his travels in India, was her guest at the same time as La Fontaine. With Madame de la Sablière and her friends our author spent his time in the careless leisure of which he was so fond, and to which he had become accustomed, working leisurely, when so disposed, at the composition and repolishing of his fables, the second instalment of which was not published until ten years after the first. In this second volume, which contained Books vii. to xi., the subjects were chiefly taken from the collection of Eastern fables bearing the names of Bidpai or Pilpay. The author himself considered this portion as his best, and it completely established his reputation. It was dedicated to Madame de Montespan, the royal favourite of the day, and closed with a poetical “epilogue,” in which he complimented the monarch himself upon his recent success, as the

conqueror who had “subdued Europe,” while the writer’s humble muse had been pursuing her innocent labours, and whose victories would supply far more glorious subjects to future poets than any apologue or fable. He had obtained leave to present a copy of his new book to the king in person, and learnt the epilogue by heart in order to recite it before his Majesty. This he did very fluently—he is said to have been an excellent reader and reciter of his own verses¹—but when it came to the presentation of the volume, it turned out that, with his usual carelessness, he had left it behind him. Louis was probably more amused than displeased; at all events, he presented La Fontaine with a purse of gold. To complete the misadventure, he left this too behind him in the carriage which had conveyed him to Versailles, and it was found, upon inquiry, carefully stowed away under the cushions. It has been remarked that the great monarch, in spite of his graciousness to the poet on this and some other occasions, never conferred upon him any of those substantial marks of his favour which many other men of letters enjoyed. The reason is probably to be found, not in moral scruples on the part of Louis, but in the unfriendly feeling of Colbert, who had succeeded Fouquet as finance minister, and who could not forgive the loyal attachment which La Fontaine had shown to the rival whom Colbert had helped to ruin.

He was already sixty-three years of age when he was

¹ On the other hand, M. Titon de Tillet, in his ‘Parnasse François,’ says that La Fontaine never could (or, at least, never would) recite one of his fables all through: but that he had a friend named Gaches who frequently accompanied him, to whom he used to refer those who asked for a recital. “I cannot,” he would say; “but Gaches there can”—and the latter used to do it with great success.

proposed as a member of the Academy. There was a strong opposition to his election. Rose, the president, threw down on the table a copy of the unfortunate 'Tales,' and asked indignantly whether the members would disgrace themselves by electing into their body a man whose works had been branded by a police censure. The king, too, had been very anxious that Boileau, who had just published some of his best works, should be elected to the vacancy; and when La Fontaine was found to have the majority of votes, Louis refused to confirm the election. In this state of dead-lock things continued for some months, when another vacancy occurred, to which Boileau was elected; and then, and not till then, the previous election of La Fontaine was confirmed by the king, and his admission into the Academy took place. At the meeting held for his reception he read his new fable of "The Fox, the Wolf, and the Horse" so charmingly, that he was begged to read it again. On the same occasion he also read a complimentary epistle in verse to his benefactress, Madame de la Sablière. A disappointed amour had changed her by this time from the gay leader of society into the devout penitent; and she spent much of her time in ministering in the Hospital of Incurables. The poet did not much like the change, and the effect upon him was to drive him into much more dangerous company. Sometimes he would now receive his friends in his own *quasi* bachelor apartment, fitted up, he tells us, with some taste: he had there a harpsichord, and busts of the great ancient philosophers in *terra cotta*; but he was far from being a philosopher in his moral habits.

At this time of his life he was under some temptation

to take up his residence in England. The predilections of the Second Charles Stuart, a Roman Catholic at heart, and a Frenchman in many of his tastes, had drawn to the English Court a little colony of French who had one good reason or another for leaving their own country. Most of these were persons of good birth and position ; and among the best known of them were Madame de Mazarin (a niece of the great Cardinal, and sister to the poet's early patroness, the Duchess de Bouillon), and her friend and favourite, Charles de St Evremond, who had fled from France from fear of being compromised in the ruin of Fouquet, to whom he had remained, like La Fontaine, loyal in the hour of his adversity. The lady had her own reasons for wishing to put the Channel between herself and her husband ; and she probably thought that La Fontaine would be a more amusing companion than the insensate Englishmen to whose society she was often condemned. When her sister, the Duchess de Bouillon, joined her in her exile, they both tried to persuade La Fontaine to come to England, and make one of a circle whose very unrestrained ease and freedom was likely to suit him exactly. M. de Bonrepaux, then French ambassador in London, joined in the invitation. It was a flattering offer, and he had heard that the English ladies were "good to look at." But he was now growing somewhat too old (he was in his sixty-sixth year, and suffering from rheumatism) to uproot himself from French soil : he was thoroughly a Frenchman. Madame de la Sablière, though he saw but little of her since the change in her mode of life, was still his kind hostess and benefactress ; and he had lately formed a new and pleasant friendship with M. d'Hervart and his young and pretty

wife, at whose house he had become a constant guest. So he made excuses, as amiably as he could, and began a clever gossiping correspondence, which he kept up for some time, with St Evremond and Bonrepaux, while he addressed to the ladies poetical epistles in his most graceful style of compliment. A previous attempt had been made, three years before, to draw the pleasant Frenchman over to the English Court by a lady who declared that he was not sufficiently appreciated at that of the French king. This was Lady Harvey, sister of Lord Montague, at that time English ambassador in France, to whom she was paying a visit. He did not allow himself to be persuaded, but he repaid the compliment by writing and dedicating to her a fable (or rather apologue) of very inferior merit—"Le Renard Anglais"¹—in which he expressed great admiration for the English character—their depth of thought, their attainments in science, their great penetration, and even their lively wit (*esprit*)—which must have been straining very far the language of compliment, as coming from a Frenchman, to his fair correspondent. Even their dogs, he declared, had a keener scent than those of his own country, and their foxes were more clever. The one point in which he found the English deficient was in their love of life: was it a polite way of saying that life in England must be very dull? At any rate, to England he did not go, nor does he seem to have entertained on either occasion any serious idea of such a step. There were two things (besides the good looks of the ladies) which, he confessed, almost tempted him at least to make the voyage. One attraction we can very well understand: he would have liked

¹ xii. 23.

to meet the poet Waller, still apparently a gay old courtier, and scattering his well-turned verses amongst his fair friends, like La Fontaine, though he was at that date nearly eighty-two. La Fontaine tells the Duchess de Bouillon, in one of his poetical epistles, how Anacreon, Waller, St Evremond, and himself would have formed, he conceives, a very pleasant quartette. Anacreon, alas! was gone, and he and Waller, as well as St Evremond, were growing very old : “But where,” he asks, “on all the banks of Hippocrene, will you find any who show so few of the wrinkles of age in their verse ?”

Waller died in that year, and when his brother poet heard the news from St Evremond, he remarked upon the happiness of living to such a green old age,—“a favour which he never expects of Heaven for himself.”

The other wish which he expresses in regard to England seems strange enough now to us : he longed to pay his respects to James II.

“One thing which I should wish, above all others, is that an opportunity could be procured for me of paying my respects to his Majesty. He is a prince who well deserves that one should cross the seas to see him, he has so many of the qualities which become a sovereign, and a true passion for glory. There are not many who address themselves in that direction, though all men in those high positions ought to do so.”

The last Stuart king has so few admirers, that it is but fair to give him all the advantage of this compliment from La Fontaine.

Between Madame d’Hervart and himself there seems to have existed the innocent and half-romantic attachment

that sometimes attracts a young and fascinating woman to a man of twice her own age. She was so charming, he says, that it would have been possible, in her case, to get over the great objection of her being one's wife. He sang her praises, in his letters to Bonrepaux, as "Silvia," proclaiming that she was to be known by that name (forgetting that he had in earlier days assigned it to Madame Fouquet) "throughout all the domains that he possessed on Mount Parnassus;" and Silvia and her pretty young friends, married and unmarried, petted and caressed the old poet to his great satisfaction, and admired the verses he still threw off occasionally, in which each fair one's charms were chanted in turn. He even fell desperately in love with one of them, Mdlle. de Beaulieu. When he parted from her on one occasion at the D'Hervarts' country-house, instead of taking the route to Paris, as he had intended, he found himself toward evening at Louvres, quite on a different road, so entirely occupied was he with thoughts of the young lady. The tale (so the hero of it wrote) would make quite a little Iliad. "Everybody laughed at the story," wrote the Abbé Vergier in reply,— "and no one was surprised." What could be expected from "a man who got up in the morning not knowing what he was going to do, and went to bed without the least idea of what he had been doing all day"? The only wonder, the Abbé added, with French gallantry, was that from a reverie on such a subject he should have awoke soon. But his adventures, the writer thought, resembled the *Odyssey* rather than the *Iliad*; in fact, La Fontaine's wanderings put him very much in mind of those of Ulysses,—with this difference, that the Greek hero roamed the seas in the hope of revisiting his wife,

while La Fontaine seemed willing to encounter any peril to escape from his one.

In these later years of his life he wrote several small pieces for the stage, some of which were acted with moderate success, as the name of their author would of itself insure, but there is nothing else to preserve them from oblivion. Molière is said to have assisted him in the composition of some of these pieces ; but there are no traces of the great dramatist's hand. One piece called "Astrea," a kind of lyric tragedy, had a narrow escape of being hissed, and was only played some half-dozen times. He had, in fact, some difficulty in getting it played at all. At the first representation he was present, and sat behind some ladies who did not know him. Every now and then he exclaimed aloud—"The piece is detestable!" "Nay, Monsieur," said one of the ladies, turning round, "it is not so bad ; the author is very clever—M. de la Fontaine." "Ladies," he replied, "the thing is worthless : that M. de la Fontaine of whom you speak is a very stupid fellow—and I am he." One of his earliest attempts in this direction was made at the request of the composer Lulli, who obtained from him a promise to write the words of an operetta. Lulli tried to bind him down to the production of the work by a particular day,—a condition totally repugnant to La Fontaine's habits and slow method of working. Then, when the piece was nearly finished, the composer wanted alterations of all kinds made in it, until both parties grew thoroughly weary of the business, and Lulli accepted an opera from another author instead. La Fontaine, however, got his "Daphne" put upon the stage in another way, and revenged himself

by a poetical satire on Lulli, under the name of ‘Le Florentin,’—the composer being a native of Florence. In this effusion he speaks of himself as having been among others the dupe of this foreigner ; he, “the nursing of the Muses, a grey-haired child, who ought never to have been a dupe in any shape, but who always was, and always would be.” There is one fairly good scene in it ; but the satire is not very bitter, and therefore not very amusing. The worst the poet wishes his enemy is, that he were in “Abraham’s bosom.” The conclusion runs somewhat in these terms :—

“And ever, as morning and evening come,
His wife and children pray at home,
And all mankind, both great and small,
Pray with one voice, if they pray at all,
‘Of your singular goodness, powers divine,
Deliver us of this Florentine !’”

The feud between poet and composer was of very short duration ; and though La Fontaine wisely forbore making any more engagements to write operas, he furnished Lulli with some prologues, which were much more in his line. He also at one time began a tragedy on the subject of “Achilles,” and got as far as two acts in manuscript. Tragedy has always been a favourite field of enterprise with both authors and actors to whose powers it was least suited ; and La Fontaine seems to have been wise enough to discover for himself that there was this incongruity in his own case. His friend the Duchess de Bouillon persuaded him at one time to write a poem on “Le Quinquina” (quinine), a remedy which was then coming into fashionable use—“*le remède Anglais*,” as it was called—and which was said to have

cured no less a personage than the minister Colbert. It will remind an English reader of Cowper taking "The Sofa" as his subject, at the request of his dear friend Lady Austen; but "Quinquina" was even less successful.

The too facile versatility of aims rather than of powers, which led him thus to attempt so many various styles, did not pass without reprobation from some of his most sincere admirers. Madame de Sévigné, who thought his Fables all that was charming, remarks upon this with some impatience in a letter to one of her friends. "I should very much like to write a fable on purpose for him—to make him understand how wretched it is for him to try to force his genius out of its proper sphere, and how this foolish attempt to sing in all keys makes bad music. He ought not to step beyond the power he has of telling a story well."

It is of this later period of his life that an anecdote is told which shows that his absence of mind and utterly unpractical habits had not changed as he grew older. He had a lawsuit going on about some property, of which he took no heed whatever. A friend of his, happening to hear that the cause was fixed for trial in Paris on a certain day, wrote to him at the country-house where he was staying, and even took the precaution to send him a horse for his journey. La Fontaine duly set out, and got within a league of Paris, when he turned aside to call on a friend. There he staid all night, and forgot all about his lawsuit until next day, when it was too late to put in an appearance, and the cause was decided against him in his absence. When he heard the result, he declared he was glad of it—he "always hated business." He was like Montaigne's

young friend, who told him one day with great glee that his mother "had lost her suit," which had been dragging on for some time past—"he was as pleased," says Montaigne, "as if it had been a cough, or a fever, or something very disagreeable to keep."

In 1692 La Fontaine was attacked with serious illness. Notwithstanding his irregular life, he had never lost his early religious impressions, and would probably have always professed himself a good Catholic, so far as theory went. Madame de la Sablière, when she heard of his danger, came from her retreat purposely to exhort him to think of his soul. His friend Racine added his affectionate entreaties. The Curé of St Roch, having discovered that a clever and earnest young Abbé of his acquaintance, named Pouget, was the son of an old friend of the poet, sent him to make such impression as he could by religious conversation. La Fontaine was pleased with his young visitor, and talked to him freely and openly. He had for some time, he said, taken to reading the New Testament. It had impressed him, apparently, even more than the prophecy of Baruch. "It is a very good book, I assure you," he remarked quite innocently to the young priest—"an excellent book." One doctrine only had not commanded his assent—he could not reconcile the idea of eternal punishment with the goodness of God. The discussion between them on this and other subjects continued for ten or twelve days, Pouget visiting the sick man twice daily. There is no reason to doubt either the honesty or accuracy of the view he took of La Fontaine's character. He found him, he says, very frank and outspoken—"as simple in evil as in good;" very ready to admit the

truth when brought before him, and utterly free from hypocrisy or double-dealing. This corresponds with the testimony of his dear friend De Maucroix—"I do not think he ever told a lie in all his life." A very touching evidence of the warm affection which the gentleness of his nature inspired in all those who were brought into close relations with him, is the anxiety of the old woman who attended him in his illness. She feared that the frequent visits of the zealous young priest fatigued the invalid. "Don't torment him so, M. l'Abbé; he is more stupid than wicked." And once, when she had heard Pouget dwelling on the terrors of the divine wrath, she called him aside and said earnestly—"Sir, God will never have the heart to damn him!"

The exhortations of the Abbé were not without effect. The sufferer had persisted throughout their interviews, that if he confessed it should be to no other priest but him. Pouget pleaded his youth and inexperience—he was only twenty-six. But La Fontaine was firm, and Pouget began to prepare him for confession. The young Abbé was no speaker of smooth things. The authorship of the 'Contes' was the great scandal of which the sick man had been guilty against society: the reparation must be as public as the offence. He must not only ask pardon of God and of the Church—he must not only promise to sanction no future edition, but he must abjure the work either in presence of chosen witnesses, before he received the last sacraments of the Church, or before the Academy, should he recover his health sufficiently to attend another meeting. The terms were stringent, and La Fontaine naturally winced at them. He protested, with a kind of moral ignorance

which almost justified the verdict of his nurse, that he could not see how the ‘Contes’ were so dangerous to morality—“they had never done *him* any harm.” And he had already tried to do something, he said, in the way of expiation; he had made an offer to another confessor, not long before, to give the profits of a new edition in alms to the poor and the Church; and that good man, not feeling capable of deciding so nice a case of conscience, had replied cautiously that he “would take higher advice.”

But the honest exhortations of the good priest found their reward. The poet not only consented to the public abjuration of his objectionable Tales, but also to another demand of his confessor, less justifiable in modern opinion, that he should commit to the flames a comedy which he had just written,—because the theatrical profession lay under the ban of the Church. He grew so much worse, that it was thought necessary for him to receive the *viaticum*, and preparations were made for this solemn ceremony. It must have been a striking and almost singular spectacle. A deputation of Academicians accompanied the Host as it was borne in procession to the sick man’s house. The chamber which he occupied was crowded with men of high rank and with well-known authors; but we miss—unhappily without surprise—the presence, in what was believed to be the closing scene of his life, of either wife or son. There, reclining in an arm-chair, with a table forming a temporary altar in front of him, La Fontaine made before that distinguished company a formal expression of repentance for his offence against the morals of society. The Abbé, after reciting the prayers of the Church, addressed

an exhortation to the penitent, and recommended him earnestly to the prayers of those assembled. Then all fell on their knees while the solemn rite was administered. Such was the impression made by this remarkable scene, that young Pouget shortly afterwards found himself pressed by applications from persons of high rank to become their confessor also.

After a long illness, however, La Fontaine so far recovered as to live two years longer in a somewhat feeble state, unfitted for much conversation or enjoyment. In 1694 he gave to the press the twelfth and last book of the Fables. Few of these were new, most of them having been published before in company with some pieces by his friend De Maucroix, in a volume called ‘Works in Prose and Poetry ;’ and some of them were not fables at all. About this time also he employed himself in versifying some of the Psalms, and read before the Academy a paraphrase in prose of the hymn “*Dies Iræ*.” He had indeed before this date appeared as a sacred poet ; for he had been prevailed upon by Henry, Count of Brienne, who had become a brother of the Oratory, to contribute to a little volume of religious miscellanies a long paraphrase of the 17th Psalm, and an epistle dedicatory, signed with his name, to the Prince de Conti.¹ During his long illness Madame de la Sablière had died ; but other friends did not fail him. As he was leaving the door of that lady’s house, where he had been paying a last melancholy visit, M. d’Hervart met him. “My dear La Fontaine,” said he, “I was

¹ ‘Recueil de Poésies Chrétiennes et Diverses.’ The volume was published under the auspices of the brotherhood of Port-Royal, and in the selection any allusion to love was carefully excluded.

looking for you, to ask you to make your home with me." "I was just on my way to you," replied the poet. The good Madame d'Hervart treated the elderly child (much older than herself) like a careful mother. He had always been somewhat careless of his person, and this carelessness grew upon him in his later years. He had worn one suit of clothes so long, that at last Madame d'Hervart quietly had them removed from his chamber, and new ones substituted. He wore them for two days, quite unconscious of any change, until a friend met him in the street, and remarked upon his unusual spruceness.

Little is told of him between this and his death in 1695, in his seventy-fourth year. In the previous year he had collected together the fables which form the twelfth and last book, most of which had already either appeared in print or had circulated in manuscript. He did not relapse in any way after his act of repentance ; it is said that he was asked to add to the 'Tales' for a new edition, and steadily refused. He also renounced all share of the profits of an edition printed in Holland, on hearing of which the young Duke of Burgundy sent him a present of a large sum of money, in order that he might be no loser by the refusal. At his death it was found that he was wearing a hair-shirt next his body. His last letter to his old and valued friend De Maucroix is simple and affecting :—

" You are assuredly mistaken, my dear friend, if it be true, as the Bishop of Soissons told me, that you think I am more ill in mind than in body. He said so to me, to keep up my courage ; but it is not that which fails me. I assure you that your best friend can hardly count on fifteen days of life. For these two last months I have never stirred out,

except now and then to go to the Academy, because that amuses me. Yesterday, as I was coming away from there, I was seized with such weakness in the middle of the Rue du Chantre, that I thought I was surely going to die. Oh, my dear friend, to die is nothing; but do you consider that I must appear before God? You know how I have lived. Before you receive this note, the gates of eternity will perhaps have opened for me."

Little more than a month afterwards he died at the house of his good friends the D'Hervarts, on April 13, 1695, in his seventy-fourth year. He was buried in the cemetery of St Joseph, in the parish of St Eustache, near his friend Molière. A characteristic epitaph, much more truthful than such compositions usually are, was found after his death in his own handwriting :—

"Poor Jean is gone; as he came, he went;
He ate up his lands as well as his rent;
For silver or gold his care was small:
For his time a fair division he found,
Spending one half in slumber sound,
And the rest in doing nothing at all."

Many have been La Fontaine's eulogists; but we may content ourselves with the words of Fénelon. All the moral aberrations of the poet—and these cannot be ignored by his most charitable apologist, however they may be redeemed by the penitence of his later years—did not prevent the excellent archbishop from bearing record in the strongest terms to the place which he held in French literature, and the loss which the whole world of letters, and the closer-drawn circle of private friends, had alike sustained. His eulogy took the shape of a kind of Latin essay, which he gave to his pupil, the young Duke of Burgundy, to translate—not a very easy task.

" Ah ! a charming man he was ! a second *Æsop* ; in his light and playful handling of his themes, superior to Phædrus. Through him dumb animals found a voice, and taught wisdom to men. Alas ! La Fontaine is gone ! O sorrow ! with him we have lost those saucy jests, that joyous laughter, that charming grace of diction, and the real learning that lay beneath it all. Mourn for him, all ye who could appreciate ingenious wit, a natural and unaffected style, an elegance neither studied nor artificial ! To him, and to him alone among men of letters, was given a licence to be careless without detriment to his excellence. How far superior is this carelessness of his to a more finished style ! How great a loss have we all sustained in his dear person ! Mourn, all ye votaries of the Muses ! But there live still, and shall always live, the beauties which he embodied in his sportive verse ; that charming trifling, that Attic wit, that sweet and winning attraction. And we rank La Fontaine, in right of his delightful talent, not amongst the writers of modern date, but among the great names of antiquity. If you hesitate to admit this, reader, open the book—what think you ? It is Anacreon whose sportive genius is there. It is Horace, whether fancy-free or in the ardour of passion, who strikes the lyre. Like Terence, he paints to the very life, in his stories, the character and the dispositions of men. There breathes throughout his work the exquisite taste and polish of Virgil. Ah ! when will the cleverest of the human race match the admirable talk he puts into the mouth of his animals ? "

There is one writer from whom we might have expected an appreciative notice of La Fontaine, both as a personal friend and as a literary critic. It has been remarked with surprise that Boileau, in his '*Art Poétique*,' has omitted fable altogether, as though it were unworthy to be classed as one of the divisions of poetry ; whereas the acknowledged excellence which La Fontaine had

attained in that particular branch should alone have entitled it to a place in any comprehensive view of the subject, especially by a French writer ; and Boileau, it might be naturally thought, would gladly have done so much justice to his old friend. But the fact remains, and remains without adequate explanation, that in Boileau's pages there is no recognition either of fable or of La Fontaine. It is true that their early friendship appears soon to have been broken up, but neither jealousy nor disagreement is alleged to have been the cause. Their paths ran separate : Boileau's morals became stricter, and La Fontaine's grew more lax ; and this is one reason assigned, surely quite insufficient, for this omission of his name. Boileau is said by some to have made the excuse that La Fontaine was only an imitator, and not an original writer. It must be remembered also that Aristotle had treated fable as a branch of rhetoric, and not of poetry ; and it is possible that Boileau may have shared to some extent the opinion of Patru, who held that the domains of poetry and of fable were quite distinct : that the perfection of the latter lay in a terse brevity, which was overlaid rather than embellished by the graces of verse. He had given this opinion when La Fontaine consulted him as to his design of versifying Æsop : and it will appear from the poet's own preface that it was not without some misgiving that he had disregarded the advice. Fables had been put into verse long before La Fontaine's day, and he professed to consider his own work inferior to the Latin iambics of Phædrus ; but that, as Fontenelle is said to have remarked, was only "his own stupidity." He was the first who adorned fable with the true graces of poetry ;

and Boileau was perhaps slow to recognise the fact that his contemporary had thus created a new branch of poetical literature. He did not foresee how much the reputation of La Fontaine, among future generations of readers, would outgrow his own.

Another distinguished fellow-countryman is said to have rendered him an unwilling homage, all the more remarkable because it was extorted in spite of his prejudice. But in this case the character of the critic explains the ungracious form of the recognition. Frederick the Second of Prussia, at one of his informal *levées*, at which Voltaire was present, praised the Fables with some enthusiasm. Voltaire sneeringly remarked that if they were examined impartially, not one of them could stand the test of criticism. The king defied him to prove his assertion. Voltaire was ashamed to retreat, and accepted the challenge. At the next meeting, he found a magnificent copy of the work laid on the table at which he generally sat. He took it up, and said he would choose a fable at random. He read a first, a second, a third, and a fourth—turning the pages here and there. At last he pitched the volume across the room in disgust, and exclaimed—“Why, the book is nothing but a collection of masterpieces !”

CHAPTER IV.

THE FABLES.

THE living personality with which La Fontaine has contrived to invest the various characters in his fables has been attributed in some degree to his close observation of the habits and characteristics of animal life. He was a warm lover of nature in all her aspects, though the attractions of society made him prefer Paris as a residence. In this he resembled his favourite Virgil, in whom some modern critics profess to see a rural Wordsworth spoilt by court patronage. His love of scenery shows itself from time to time in his letters : as to trees, "he respected them," says St Marc Girardin, "almost as much as an Englishman does."¹ He loved the untrimmed luxuriance of nature ; he cannot bear that man should "mutilate the innocent forest ; who but must grieve that its pleasant shade shall be exposed to such outrages ?" His habit was, he tells us, to compose in the open air. The verse which flows so smoothly, and with such natural ease and grace, was the product of much mental labour—elaborated, as he tells us, "by dint of time and pains," polished and repolished both in thought

¹ 'La Fontaine et les Fabulistes,' i. 298.

and in writing.¹ He would spend whole days in the woods, watching, as it would appear, the habits of their occupants. A kind of grotto is still shown in the wood of Ferté-Milon, near Château-Thierry, called "Le Cabinet de Fabuliste," in which it is said he sometimes passed the night in composition. He was once missing for twenty-four hours in the forest of Vassy, and a regular party of beaters was organised to go out to look for him. At another time, when he was a guest of Lady Harvey, he was absent from dinner, and did not make his appearance until nightfall. His excuse was that he had been attending an ant's funeral—he had followed the corpse to the place of burial, and afterwards accompanied the mourners home.² The numberless little touches with

¹ Book xii., fable 9. Compare the original draft of 'The Fox and the Flies' (p. 9) with the fable as published, xii. 13.

² It seems probable that he was led to make this particular observation by what he had read in Plutarch (one of his favourite authors) "On the Cleverness of Animals," where it is said that the philosopher Cleanthes "saw certain ants coming out of their hill, bearing the body of a dead ant in the direction of another ant-hill, out of which issued a party of other ants to meet them, as if for a parley. After they had been together a while, the first party returned (to consult, one may suppose, with their fellow-citizens), and so made two or three journeys, owing to the difficulty of coming to terms. At last the second party brought to the first a worm out of their burrow, as if by way of ransom for the corpse ; and this worm the first party took upon their backs and carried off home, leaving with the others the body of the dead ant, who had doubtless been an intruder." Montaigne quotes the story in his 'Apology for Sebonde.' A modern naturalist observed a similar instance of the care of the ants for their dead : "A number of ants which had attacked a little boy had been killed, about twenty of them lying dead upon the ground. After a while, a procession of ants came from the nest and marched two by two towards their dead companions. Four were told off to each corpse, two carrying it and the other two walking behind. When the bearers were tired, they transferred their burden to the second pair, and walked behind the others in their turn. A body of two hundred or so brought

which he paints the idiosyncrasies of his dumb friends show not only a close observation of their habits and an appreciative distinction of their several characters, but a kindly sympathy with the creatures themselves. We do not hear of his having any pets ; but we can gather that, like many men of easy disposition, he was fonder of animals than of children. His knowledge of birds and beasts, however, was sympathetic, not scientific ; and it did not keep him from making the mistakes about them which were common to his age. He confounds the camel with the dromedary, he thought that moles were blind, and that the venom of the serpent lay in its tail. M. Taine, in his charming volume,¹ compares Florian unfavourably with his predecessor in his presentation of animal life ; and undoubtedly La Fontaine's animals are far more lifelike, and, if one may so speak, more human. Florian's rabbit is, as the French critic observes, too sentimental ; a tender friendship, such as Florian imagines between him and the teal, is not at all in his line ; the volatile "Jean Lapin" of La Fontaine is much more like the rabbit that we know. But when La Fontaine makes him take refuge in the beetle's hole, he certainly takes greater liberties with nature than Florian. Possibly, as a fable-writer, he had in his mind that wonderful beetle immortalised by Aristophanes in his comedy of "Peace," on whose back the Athenian vine-dresser rides up to the court of Jupiter ; for the dramatist

up the rear. . . . On reaching a sandy hillock, about half of them set to work at digging graves for their comrades, one grave for each ant, and the other half laid the bodies in the graves and filled them up with the soil."—Rev. J. G. Wood in 'Sunday Magazine,' Sept. 1880.

¹ 'La Fontaine et ses Fables,' p. 201.

evidently borrowed his beetle from *Æsop*, who makes him take revenge upon his enemy the eagle by flying up to Jupiter's throne, and startling the god so as to make him drop the eggs which his pet bird had persuaded him to nurse in his lap for safety.

But though we must not go to *La Fontaine* for our natural history, his animals—his quadrupeds especially—are all charmingly real in one sense, and that the most essential to his readers' enjoyment. They are no longer the cold and formal impersonations of *Æsop* and *Phædrus*. In their fables, it is true, each animal is to a certain extent the representative of some special moral quality—the lion is domineering, the wolf and the kite are cruel, the fox cunning, the ass dull, the sheep helpless; but beyond these generalities of character we find very little individuality of type. But the actors in *La Fontaine's* stories are not merely the regular stage representatives of the several virtues and vices, but have a distinct personality of their own. The dog, the fox, and the rabbit are not only made to talk as we might imagine them to talk, but, as one may say, to think as we might conceive them to think. Probably *La Fontaine* would have maintained that they did think, in their degree. In the "discourse" addressed to his dear friend Madame de la Sablière (a student of the then fashionable philosophy of Descartes), in which he has embedded the first fable of his tenth book, he gives us his creed as to the reasoning powers of animals. He accuses Descartes, somewhat unfairly, of regarding beasts in the light of mere machines,—a judgment which, in the face of so many evidences of a high amount of intelligence in their behaviour (he instances the beaver), he will not for a

moment admit. But, as a matter of fact, his own views were more in accordance with those of Descartes than he here allows. "I would assign reason to animals," he says, "very much as I would to children." This is nearly what Descartes had said, when his arguments against the intelligence of brutes were met by the objection that they would apply equally to infants—that he would not have believed these latter had souls, but for the fact of their development in the adult. He saw the difficulty which had presented itself, two thousand years before, to Aristotle. "To look at man in his infancy," says the Greek physiologist, "his soul differs not at all, so to speak, from that of the beast."¹ Leibnitz confesses that he saw so little distinction even between some grown-up men and some beasts, that he found a difficulty in drawing any sharp line of demarcation, in point of intellect, between man and brute. Montaigne said much the same—that he found a much wider interval between individual men than between the lowest type of men and an intelligent brute. La Fontaine maintains—it may be half in jest—that we have really two kinds of souls (if that word may be used to express the French *âme*), the one common to us and the brutes, the other an endowment which we share with the angels. Brutes, according to him, have a kind of reason, but lack reflection and conscience. Some modern "dog-stories," which have been vouched for on credible authority, seem to imply even the presence of conscience in a lower degree.

Some of the best fables are to be found, as we might

¹ 'Hist. Animal,' viii. So, in his Ethics, he assigns to man a share in the nature both of the god and the brute.

naturally expect, in the earlier books ; the first Book, especially, preserves more of the distinct character of fable than the rest. "The Grasshopper and the Ant," which stands first of all, is, indeed, one of his weakest, and Chamfort is not far wrong in his surmise that it owes such reputation as it has chiefly to the accident of its position ; partly also, no doubt, to the general popularity of the ant—dating from at least the time of Solomon—as an example of industry and forethought. The moral may be called selfish, and more than one writer has humorously contended that the grasshoppers of society are the more amiable characters of the two. Lenoble, in his version of this fable, feeling probably that the moral was weak as it stood, makes his grasshopper laugh at the ant's industry, and so in some degree deserve the repulse she meets with afterwards. Modern naturalists express more than a doubt as to the ant's being an example of providence at all.

"The Fox and the Crow," "The Frog and the Ox," "The Dog and the Wolf," "The Wolf and the Lamb," are all charming, but so generally familiar in the French and other versions as to need little more than mention. The first of these, however, has received a good many additions and variations. Lessing, by way of improving the moral, represents the Crow as holding a piece of meat which has been poisoned ; and the Fox, who eats it when she has dropped it, becomes the victim of his own cunning. Richer, in his second fable, gives the Crow her revenge. The Fox in his turn has carried off a bit of bacon : the Crow comes up and talks to him, and points suggestively to some ducks and fowls not far off. The Fox goes after them, but in vain ; and on his re-

turn finds that the Crow has eaten the bacon, and is safe on a tree. "You remember the cheese, my friend?" is all she remarks. The Empress Catherine of Russia composed for her private theatre a little comedy on the subject—"Des Flatteurs et des Flattés"—in which the characters are Monsieur and Madame de Corbec and Monsieur Renard.

Rousseau has chosen this fable as an illustration of his remarkable argument (an argument which would certainly never have occurred to any other than a theoretical educationist) that fables are unsuited for children. He not only objects to the inverted order in which the words are occasionally placed (an objection applying to poetry in general, and not to fables in particular), and to the use of the forms "Master Crow" and "Master Fox," but he is shocked at the improbability of the fox and the crow using the same language, or indeed at their being made to talk at all: forgetting that a child's imagination is one of its strongest faculties, and that to its inexperience no marvel is improbable. The child who may never have heard a fable told will make her doll talk; and if animals are to talk at all, a child would certainly expect them all to talk in its own language. They speak, says the poet, with a far more true appreciation of his art, "the language of the gods"¹—a tongue understood by all nature. The critic takes stronger ground when he questions the value of the morality which the fables may teach. From the Fox and the Crow, he says, the child will learn the power of flattery; from the conduct of the Ant to the Grasshopper he will learn selfishness; from the division of the game at

¹ Fables, ix. 1.

the Lion's Hunting-party, a lesson of injustice; from the Wolf and the House-dog, a lesson of independence. He remarks, with more appreciation of the nature of children than he shows elsewhere, that they are very apt, in their own private application of such fables, to run somewhat counter to the author's intentions. He tells an amusing story of one small friend of his own, to which most readers could find a parallel in their own experience. "In the fable of the lean Wolf and the well-fed House-dog, instead of the lesson of good behaviour which is sought to be inculcated, the child sees the attraction of licence. I shall never forget having found a little girl weeping bitterly, who had been made miserable by this fable, which had been quoted to impress upon her the virtue of docility. There was some trouble to find out the cause of her tears: at last it was discovered. The poor child was weary of being chained up—she felt her neck galled; she was crying because she was not a wolf."¹ It was certainly a very injudicious use of the fable; and it may be doubted whether the child was not quite right, according to the view of the old fabulist from whom La Fontaine borrowed it. La Fontaine, at any rate, would surely have sympathised with the child; for there was no one whom the fetters of social law and order would have galled more uncomfortably than the man who declares, in one of his letters, that he "cared to do nothing, from morning till night, but follow his own will and fancy."

The educational theorist might have objected that such fables as La Fontaine's are scarcely adapted for children, on another ground,—that they can have no appreciation

¹ *Emile*, Book ii.

at all of the finer points of the satire, and perfect turns of expression, which form their charm to older readers. The same may be said of those delightful stories of Hans Andersen, and of some other clever "nursery" books by modern writers: such finer fancies meet with their most appreciative readers in children of a larger growth, while those for whom they were intended go back, if permitted, with unfailing content to the old tales which charmed their grandfathers and grandmothers in their infancy.

The author's own favourite is said to have been "The Oak and the Rush." The apologue itself is as old as Æsop, and Haudent had already given it a French dress.

THE OAK AND THE RUSH.

"The Oak said to the Rush (when oaks could talk)—
 ' Nature has dealt but hardly with you, friend ;
 The wren's light weight sits heavy on your stalk ;
 The lightest breeze that for a moment's space
 Ruffles the water's face
 Will make you bend :
 While my grand crest like Caucasus upsoars,
 Baffles the high sun's scorching heat,
 Braves every wind that roars :
 All blasts to you are storms—to me are zephyrs sweet.
 Yet still, had you been born
 Within the circle of these branches vast,
 Which round my trunk their sheltering shadows cast,
 Your lot had not been so forlorn—
 I should have screened you from the sweeping blast.
 But you are wont to grow
 Down in the marshes low,
 The bleak dominions of the tyrant Wind :
 Nature to you has been indeed unkind.'
 Then the Rush spake—
 ' Your pity shows a generous heart, 'tis true ;

But pray be not uneasy for my sake :
Storms are less dangerous to me than you—

I bend, but do not break.
You to this hour have held their force in check,
Nor ever bowed your neck
To any wind that blows—yet wait the end.'

As the Rush spoke,
Forth o'er the horizon's verge the tempest broke—
The fiercest of his sons the North could send.
The Oak bore stoutly up—the Rush bent low.

Fiercer and fiercer raged the storm,
Nor would its wrath forego,
Till all uprooted lay the giant form
Whose topmost branch had seemed to touch the sky,
Whose roots pierced down to where the dead men lie."

The moral does not breathe a high tone ; but that we must not look for in La Fontaine. This bending to circumstances may be worldly-wise, but it is not heroic. There is a fine fable in the German of Lessing, said to have been composed by him as an intentional contrast to the Frenchman's.¹ He represents a mighty Oak as having been thrown down by the wind during a tempestuous night. A Fox, who has long lived under its roots, comes out of his earth in the morning, and sees the

¹ We have not here to deal with the German fables : but some of Lessing's are quite as perfect in their way as any of La Fontaine's. The following (somewhat abridged) may be quoted as a good specimen :—

Pluto, finding that his Furies were growing old and slack in their duties, sent Mercury into the upper world to procure him three new ones, who should possess the needful qualifications. About the same time Juno was anxious to disprove the boast of Venus that no woman was insensible to her power, and had sent Iris down to earth to find for her three women of severe virtue, who had never smiled on man nor dreamt of love. Iris found them, after long and weary seeking, but too late—Mercury had already engaged them as Furies.

Oak prostrate on the ground. "What a grand tree!" he exclaims; "I never knew he was so great!" It is a striking apologue: the lesson which it teaches, more refined and less obvious than the moral of ordinary fables, is exemplified from time to time in human life. Too often it is not until the great and good are taken from us that we, who have lived under their shadow, realise how noble they were.

Walkenaer, whose careful study of La Fontaine's life and works gives to his opinion no ordinary weight, prefers to any of the others the fable of "Death and the Dying Man," the original of which is to be found in the Latin of Abstemius. It has been cleverly paraphrased in English by Mrs Thrale in her "Three Warnings"—a piece little known, perhaps, to the modern generation of readers, but whose merit fully justifies the high opinion entertained by Johnson of her ability. The opening of La Fontaine's fable may be omitted as rather too sermon-like (he is fond of sermonising now and then); its story runs as follows:—

THE DYING MAN AND DEATH—(viii. 1).

"A patriarch who could count a hundred years
 Complained of Death's approach with groans and tears—
 At such short notice, too!
 His will not made, and sundry things to do!
 'What! must one die straight off, and die to-day?
 Nay, wait a while, I pray:
 You must not go without me, cries my spouse;
 I must leave something to my grandchild there;
 I've a new wing just building to my house;—
 O cruel Power, forbear!
 'Old man,' said Death,
 You cannot say I take you by surprise;

Chide not with hasty breath
 What seems impatience in your selfish eyes :
 You've lived a hundred years ; show me the man
 Old as yourself in Paris, if you can ;
 In all wide France not ten have reached that span.
 I should, you say, have given you warning fair,
 That so for this last call you might prepare,

And I might find

Your will all duly signed,
 Your grandchild's interests safe, your building done.

What ! can you make pretence

You had no warning, when your every sense
 Grew dull and torpid ; taste and hearing gone,
 Limbs weak, mind failing, and the very sun

Too chill to warm your blood ?

Life, in your case, had little left of good.

The comrades of your youth

I had already shown you dead or dying—
 Were not these warnings loud enough, forsooth ?

Come—no replying :

As to your will, the State will care no jot

Whether 'tis made or not.'

Sure, Death was right ; 'twere well that at ripe years
 One should quit life without regrets or fears,

Rise from its banquet like a well-fed guest,¹
 And pack one's baggage up, and thank the host,
 Then take the road ; for brief the time at most

The unwilling foot can lag behind the rest.
 You murmur, aged traveller ? see, the young

Die with light heart—yea, rush on death in view ;
 Deaths such as fame's ennobling voice hath sung,

Glorious and bright, yet sharp and painful too.—
 I waste my words : I lay my moral by ;

The old, half dead, are yet most loath to die."

¹ The author has borrowed this Epicurean simile from his favourite Horace's "conviva satur" (Sat. I. i. 119).

Mrs Thrale has put her moral first, and it is, if possible, even more happily turned than the original :—

“The tree of deepest root is found
Least willing still to quit the ground.”

This natural shrinking from death, even when life would seem no longer worth living, is illustrated repeatedly in these fables. We have it in the epigram (for such it is rather than a fable) in which the poor wretch who calls for Death to end his misery shrinks from the awful visitor when he appears (i. 15). The author there takes occasion to introduce, as it were with a kind of sneer, “that most abject protestation of Mæcenas,” as he calls it, that he would be content to bear every conceivable infirmity of age, and even the most torturing pain, so that only life was left to him.¹ So it is in the fable which follows this — Æsop’s “Death and the Woodcutter.” The old man, tired out with the hardships of his daily life, the claims of “wife, children, taxes, creditors, and Government forced labour,” throws down the fagot that is breaking his back, and invokes Death to relieve him at once from all his burdens. Death appears, and asks what is wanted of him. The old woodcutter replies, with happy promptness, that if he would just be good enough to help his load up again—“it would hardly delay him a moment.” La Fontaine concludes that “any suffering rather than death” is the real motto of most men. It is hard to say whether he himself claimed in this to be superior to the vulgar majority : whether we are to take this as a reproof of their weakness, or a con-

¹ See Seneca’s Epistles, 101.

fession of his own. Most of his French critics consider that he intended, in the fine lines which close the other fable, to express his own conviction that a man ought, at least if he be spared to a good old age, to quit the world cheerfully, as having enjoyed his full share of it. But we must remember that he had considered the English deficient in their "love of life," which they seemed scarcely to appreciate like his own gayer countrymen. Louis Racine remarks upon Mæcenas's words, as quoted by La Fontaine, that the Roman was quite right, and that those who disagreed with him were either insincere or mistaken.

"The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse," which conveys the same moral as "The Wolf and the House-dog," is far more cleverly and amusingly given both by Horace and in Pope's admirable "imitation." But the following is in the author's best style, and its philosophy (in spite of his partial disclaimer) is very much that which governed his own life:—

THE BAT AND THE TWO WEASELS—(ii. 5).

"A Bat in his blind flight

Rushed headlong into an old Weasel's hole,
Who hated mice with all his heart and soul,
And straight made at him, furious at the sight.

'What! have you dared to show your hateful face

Inside my house—

One of your mischievous accursèd race?

As sure as I'm a weasel, you're a mouse!'

'Excuse me,' said the trembling refugee,

'That really is not my vocation;

Some wretched slanderer, I plainly see,

Has wronged me in your estimation.

A mouse?—oh dear, no! What! with wings, like me?

I am a bird, I say.
 Long live the feathered race that skims the air !'
 Such reasoning sounded fair ;
 Proof positive, it seemed, was there,
 And the Bat went his way.
 Some two days afterwards, the stupid creature
 Into a second Weasel's lodgings flew,
 Who was at feud with all the feathered crew :
 Again, by reason of his doubtful feature,
 He found himself in peril of his life :
 Rushing to meet him,
 The Weasel's long-nosed wife
 Thought him a bird, and was prepared to eat him.
 Again he made his piteous protest heard :
 ' Oh, madam, you're mistaken ! I a bird !
 Why, you can't see !
 What makes a bird ? Feathers—not fur, like me !
 No—I'm a mouse : long live the mice and rats !
 And Jove confound all cats !'
 So, by his twofold plea,
 The trimmer kept his life and liberty."

The moral which the author attaches to this fable is not of a high order, if we are to take it as a moral at all. There are many, he says, who in dangerous times show the prudence of the Bat—who consult their personal safety by changing their colours. "According to these gentlemen, the wise man's watchword is, 'Long live the King ! Long live the League !'"—just as the fortunes of Henry III. or the Guises happened to be in the ascendant. La Fontaine's critics tell us that this kind of worldly wisdom is in fact the teaching of his fables generally—that the real secret of a safe and easy life, as this world goes, is not to have too much principle. He has certainly treated the Bat, in his double character

of beast and bird, in a different spirit from that of some earlier fabulists. In the well-known fable attributed to Æsop, "The Battle of the Birds and Beasts," the Bat is made to take advantage of his epicene nature to watch the turn of events, and to range himself on the side of the beasts so soon as they appear to have the best of it; but when in the end the birds are victorious, he finds that all he has gained by his policy is the hate and contempt of both parties, and has to hide himself ever after from the daylight, and appear only at dusk. And the moral, as the Latin version gives it, strikes a much nobler chord than La Fontaine's—

"He who would sell himself to either name,
Hated by both, shall lead a life of shame."¹

The Chinese fable, or rather story (probably the oldest of the many in which the Bat figures), does not let him off much more easily. In that story the Phœnix, as king of the birds, celebrates his birthday, when all his subjects flock dutifully to pay their homage. The Bat is not among them. "I have four feet," he explains, "and therefore rank among the quadrupeds; why should I appear on the occasion?" Shortly afterwards, the king of the beasts would keep his birthday too, and his loyal subjects are not less ready with their compliments. Again the Bat holds back—he has wings, and plainly owes no allegiance in that quarter. But the result is that he is repudiated both by beasts and birds, and we are warned in the application that there are in the world a good many characters like the Bat, who are neither

¹ "Qui se duabus venditabit partibus,
Utrisque ingratus, vitam deget turpiter."

one thing nor the other, and consequently “one knows not what to do with them.”¹

The next has always been a favourite, and its good-humoured moral is of universal application.

THE MILK-WOMAN AND HER PAIL—(vii. 10).

“With milk-pail deftly cushioned on her head,
High-kilted petticoat, shoes stout and strong,
The good Perrette

Fast towards the neighbouring town to market sped.

Dreaming no ill, lightly she stepped along,
Counted the price that she would surely get
For that fine pail of milk, and cast about
How she should lay it out.

First, she would buy a hundred eggs, from which
Three broods at least would hatch ; she should get rich,
By care and pains, no doubt.

‘So very easy it will be,’ she thought,
‘To raise the chickens by my cottage door ;
And Master Fox—he must be sharp indeed,
If he don’t leave enough of my fine breed
To buy one pig at least—it may be more.
My pig will soon get fat, at no expense—
He must be pretty forward when he’s bought—
And if I sell him fairly, as I ought,

My gains will be immense.

Then what should hinder me from being able
(Things are so cheap just now)

To put a cow and calf into my stable ?
Then, when they join the village herd,
How nice to see them skip—my calf and cow !’

And, at the word,
She gave three skips herself—the milk-pail fell—

And so at once farewell
To cow and calf, and pig, and chickens that would sell !

¹ Stanislas Julien, ‘Les Avadânes,’ ii. 154.

The mistress of this visionary store
 Cast one sad glance around
 To where her ruined fortunes soaked the ground,
 Then turned, and bore
 Her empty pail back to her husband's door :
 He would meet all excuses with a curse,
 And very probably with something worse.

Who does not weave such dreams at fancy's call ?
 Who does not build his castles in the air ?
 Picrochole,¹ Pyrrhus,² and the milkmaid—all,
 Wise men and fools alike, are builders there.
 All have our waking dreams, our visions sweet,
 Some fond illusion all our souls beguiles ;
 All that the world can give lies at our feet—
 Honours unbounded, beauty's warmest smiles.
 In fancy's hour, no man can stand before me ;
 I dethrone sultans, and I reign instead ;
 Elected king, my subjects all adore me,
 And diadems come raining on my head :
 A chance recalls me to myself once more—
 And I am poor Tom Noddy, as before."

It is a moral which has been variously illustrated in almost all languages. The Eastern analogue of the reverie of Alnaschar (or El-Feshshár, as Mr Lane prefers to call him), who kicks down the basket of glass which is to make his future fortune while he dreams that he is spurning the vizier's daughter, is more widely known, perhaps, through the 'Arabian Nights,'³ than even this fable of La Fontaine.

¹ The ambitious and visionary king of Lerna, to whom his officers promised a long career of chimerical victories.—Rabelais, Garg. i. 33.

² When Pyrrhus was planning the conquest of Rome, Sicily, Africa, and Greece in succession, his minister Cineas checked him with the repeated question, "And what next?"

³ Story of the Barber's fifth brother.

One or two more of his best may be given without comment. The following has always been a special favourite with French readers :—

THE COCK, THE CAT, AND THE YOUNG MOUSE—(vi. 5).

“ A pert young Mouse, to whom the world was new,
 Had once a near escape, if all be true.
 He told his mother, as I now tell you :
 ‘ I crossed the mountains that beyond us rise,
 And, journeying onwards, bore me
 As one who had a great career before me,
 When lo ! two creatures met my wondering eyes,—
 The one of gracious mien, benign and mild ;
 The other fierce and wild,
 With high-pitched voice that filled me with alarm ;
 A lump of sanguine flesh grew on his head,
 And with a kind of arm
 He raised himself in air,
 As if to hover there ;
 His tail was like a horseman’s plume outspread.’
 (It was a farmyard Cock, you understand,
 That our young friend described in terms so grand,
 As ’twere some marvel come from foreign land.)
 ‘ With arms raised high
 He beat his sides, and made such hideous cry,
 That even I,
 Brave as I am, thank Heaven ! had wellnigh fainted :
 Straightway I took to flight,
 And cursed him left and right.
 Ah ! but for him, I might have got acquainted
 With that sweet creature,
 Who bore attractiveness in every feature :
 A velvet skin he had, like yours and mine,
 A tail so long and fine,
 A sweet, meek countenance, a modest air—
 Yet what an eye was there !

I feel that, on the whole,
 He must have strong affinities of soul
 With our great race—our ears are shaped the same.
 I should have made my bow, and asked his name,
 But at the fearful cry
 Raised by that monster, I was forced to fly.’
 ‘My child,’ replied his mother, ‘you have seen
 That demure hypocrite we call a Cat :
 Under that sleek and inoffensive mien
 He bears a deadly hate of Mouse and Rat.
 The other, whom you feared, is harmless—quite ;
 Nay, perhaps may serve us for a meal some night.
 As for your friend, for all his innocent air,
 We form the staple of his bill of fare.’

Take, while you live, this warning as your guide—
 Don’t judge by the outside.”

THE MUSICIAN AND THE FISHES—(x. 11).¹

“ Young Thyrsis had a lute and voice
 So deftly tuned that, when he sang
 To woo the maiden of his choice,
 So sweet th’ harmonious music rang,
 The dead might wake to hear.
 One day, down in a flowery glade
 He sat and sang, while zephyrs played
 Along the streamlet clear ;
 Annette was fishing by his side,
 But all in vain her art she tried,
 For never fish came near.
 The shepherd, whose enchanting song
 Might move the hardest breast,
 Thought he could charm—but he was wrong—
 The fishes like the rest :
 So he began,
 And thus it ran :—

¹ For the use of this fable by Cyrus, see p. 8.

‘ Ye citizens of these fair waves,
 Leave your cold Naiads in their caves,
 And come to upper air,
 The far-surpassing charms to see
 Of her I love, nor fear to be
 The prisoners of my fair.
 She will not use you cruelly ;
 She is not cruel—save to me.
 No fatal ambush need you fear ;
 A tank of water, crystal-clear,
 Awaits you here on land ;
 And, if she eats one now and then,
 It were a boon for fish or men
 To die by her sweet hand.’
 It was most moving eloquence, no doubt ;
 But not a fish came out.
 His audience were as deaf as they were mute ;
 All his melodious suit
 Was urged in vain—his failure was complete.
 He got a net, and set it in the place,
 And in brief space
 The fish lay flopping at the damsel’s feet.”

THE COBBLER AND THE BANKER—(viii. 2).

“There was a Cobbler once who chirped and sang
 From morn till eve : so loud his clear voice rang,
 ’Twas marvellous to hear him :
 Not one of all the seven wise men of old,
 In point of happiness, came near him.
 His neighbour, meanwhile, had large store of gold
 (He was a stockbroker), but as for singing,
 He could not sing, nor even sleep, and when
 Towards dawn he got a nap, he woke again,
 So loud the merry Cobbler’s voice was ringing ;
 Till he began to think
 Kind Providence might well have taken care

That in the market, amongst other ware,
 Men could buy sleep, as they can food and drink.
 So to his house he asked this tuneful soul,
 And questioned him—‘ Tell me, my honest friend,
 What do you make a-year, now, on the whole ? ’

‘ Ha, ha ! ’ (the man quite grinned)—
 ‘ Make in a year, your honour ? By the powers,
 Such ways of reckoning suit your trade, not ours ;
 I never save,—

I live from hand to mouth on what I have ;—
 I do but scrape along from day to day,
 And reach the year’s end somehow, in a way.’
 ‘ Come, then,—your daily earnings you can tell ? ’
 ‘ Well, more or less—if days were all alike,

One might do pretty well ;

Trade’s good enough for me,

But for these fête-days, when one has to strike ;

They ruin us in holidays, you see—

That’s my complaint :

And then for each new saint

That gets into the Calendar, our Curé

He charges for a sermon, I assure ye.’

Pleased with his simple talk, the merchant said,
 ‘ I’ll make you rich for once, my honest friend ;
 Here, take these hundred crowns : if times don’t mend,
 They’ll stand you in good stead.’

The Cobbler eyed the gold—

‘ Twas more than he had thought the earth could hold :

Then hied him home, and in his cobbler’s cell

Buried the money—and his mirth as well.

Now no more songs for him ; he lost his voice,
 Soon as he gained this poisoner of his joys :

Sleep left his bed,

Cares came instead,

Suspicion, false alarms, and dreams appalling :

All day, though he sat cobbling as before,

He kept one eye still fixed upon his door,

And if at night he heard a caterwauling—
That cat had smelt the gold, and came to fetch it.

At last he grew so wretched,
He sought his friend, whose slumbers now were deep
(No cheery voice disturbed him as of old),
'Give me again my carols and my sleep,—
Take back your cursed gold.'"

The form of this story is borrowed from Bonaventure Despériers, the unfortunate secretary of Queen Margaret of Navarre; but the catastrophe is somewhat altered from the original, in which the cobbler finds a crock of gold, which causes him so much anxiety, and makes his life so miserable, that at last he throws it into the sea, and so "drowns all his melancholy with that pot." But the apologue, which teaches that a sudden advancement from poverty to wealth does not necessarily bring happiness, is at least as old as Horace, whose version of it La Fontaine has indeed followed more closely in some points than Bonaventure's. Horace introduces his story not as a fable, but as an anecdote of the great Roman pleader Lucius Philippus, who, oppressed with the professional duties which have brought him so much fame and money, envies the careless cheerfulness which he sees in a humble shopkeeper: he invites the man to dinner, and to amuse himself with the experiment (not without a cynical prevision of what the effect on the man will be), gives him a sum of money and persuades him to buy a farm. The result is much the same as told in the French fable.¹

¹ Horace's Epist., i. 7.

THE COURT OF THE LION—(vii. 7).

“ His majesty the Lion fain would know
 How far the gods had given him rule below :
 To east, west, south, and north,
 To his obedient vassals in each land,
 He sent his heralds forth,
 With proclamation under his own hand,
 And sealed with his own seal. The purport told
 That for one month’s space would his highness hold

 A royal court, for all to come who would ;
 To open with a banquet in high state,
 And with a Punch and Judy to conclude ;
 For a munificence so truly great

 Through the whole world would spread his reputation.
 So all the beasts of high and low estate

 Came to the Royal Den by invitation.
 But what a den ! a charnel-house, in fact,
 Whose odour shocked the senses as one entered ;
 The grim old Bear, who was the first that ventured,

 Straight stopped his nose—an act
 Which he would much more wisely have omitted :
 For the gross breach of manners thus committed
 The angry king despatched him straight, to go
 And turn his nose up in the shades below.

The Ape, base flatterer, said the king did well :
 Praised the stern justice that he saw,

 The force of the imperial paw—
 ‘ Such grand apartments, and—that charming smell !
 Amber and spikenard, and all flowers that bloom,
 Were garlic, as compared with such perfume ! ’
 This was too gross to meet with approbation ;

 The Ape received his sentence too :

 The lion-king loved flattery, ‘twas true,
 But, like Caligula, in moderation.
 The Fox stood near. ‘ Ho ! ’ said the royal brute,
 ‘ Sir Reynard, there ! speak out !—what say you to’t ? ’

Reynard made much excuse ; he could not smell—
He had a wretched cold, and slight congestion—
It was impossible for him to tell ;
In short, he shirked the question.

Here is a lesson, gentlemen, for you,
Which a good courtier still should keep in view :
Gross adulation palls ; plain-speaking shocks :
Best give a diplomatic answer, like the Fox."

The original of this (though with a different moral) is to be found in the old Latin collection known as the 'Fables of Romulus.' The Wolf, pending the Lion's temporary absence, has been elected viceroy by the animals. The Lion doubts the wisdom of the choice, and by his advice they exact an oath from their new ruler not to injure or devour any of his subjects. This oath the Wolf has no mind to keep, and casts about for some way of evading it. He asks the Goat to give an opinion as to his breath—is it at all disagreeable? and the Goat, with more honesty than wit, pronounces its odour insupportable. An appeal is made to the beasts in council as to the fitting punishment for insulting language to their king: sentence of death is at once pronounced, and the Goat is killed and divided among them—the Wolf, of course, receiving the royal share. When next he is hungry, he asks the same question of the Hind, who thinks to save herself by declaring the scent to be charming. She is convicted for untruth, and shares the fate of the Goat. Next the Wolf casts his eye on a fine fat young Ape, and feigning illness, procures from his medical attendants an opinion that in order to get well his appetite must be humoured. He declares he

can think of nothing he could eat unless it were a bit of ape's flesh—but he had rather die than break his oath. His "barons" unanimously absolve him for the nonce ; but from that time forth, says the old fabulist, he held himself free to eat any of them.¹

The insecurity of life and liberty under the reign of an irresponsible power is, in fact, rather a favourite commonplace of the author's. His majesty the Lion is anything but a model of justice, and does not enjoy the confidence of his subjects, however he may command their allegiance. The fable of "The Hare's Ears" (v. 4) is Eastern in its origin, as might be guessed from its tone (M. Robert ascribes it to Saadi), but La Fontaine probably took it from the Latin of Faërne.

"It chanced that some unruly hornèd beast
 Had gored the Lion-king ;
 Who, hot with wrath at such a monstrous thing,
 Vowed to secure himself henceforth at least,
 And issued strict command,
 All creatures that wore horns should quit his land.
 Goats, rams, and bulls decamped that very day ;
 The stags sought change of air ;
 Of all his long- and short-horned subjects there,
 None lost an hour in getting safe away.
 The Hare, a timid creature,
 Caught sight in shadow of his poor long ears,
 And grew distraught with fears
 Lest some might construe into horns that feature.
 He sought the Grasshopper, his country neighbour :
 ‘Adieu,’ said he, ‘my friend—
 I’m off at once : I feel that, in the end,
 Under some false impeachment I shall labour :
 My ears will count as horns, you may depend.

¹ Robert, 'Fables Inédites,' ii. 561.

Nay, even if I displayed 'em
Short as an ostrich, 'twould be all the same ;
 Horns is their name.'
'Horns!' quoth his friend,—'they're ears, as Heaven
made 'em ;'
 D'y'e take me for a fool ?'
'Horns they will be, for all that,' said the Hare,
'Plain as a unicorn's, by this new rule ;
 Protest nor prayer,
If I'm clapt up in jail, will serve me there.'"

We are left in this case to gather for ourselves the moral, which Faerne, however, subjoins, lest we might miss it—"He who has to live under a tyranny, though he be innocent, will often suffer as guilty." His version is perhaps even more amusing and more piquant, because it is the cunning Fox that is suspicious of the possible interpretation of the edict, and not the timid Hare. The Lion, out of mere caprice, banishes from his dominions all animals who lack the dignified appendage of a tail. The Ape, of course, has to leave the kingdom at once; and as he is going off, he comes upon the Fox, who is packing up his baggage. The Ape remarks to him that at any rate *he* is safe enough; if any fault could be found with *him*, it would be that he had rather *too much* tail. The Fox replies that what his friend says may be true, but that it is impossible to say what view the Lion may be pleased to take of the matter. Aubert has a different version still. The Lion has lost an eye by the claw of a tiger, and he orders the condign punishment of all animals who have curved claws. The whole feline tribe quit the kingdom. The unfortunate Ass considers himself safe enough; but the king's emissaries, determined to find a victim, discover that his hoofs are claws, and he is made to suffer accordingly.

La Fontaine understood too well his own powers of narrative to submit himself implicitly to the recognised canons of fable. Patru—"the Quintilian of France"—had laid it down as an axiom in literature that verse was altogether an inappropriate vehicle for fable, whose chief ornament he held to be "the having no ornament at all;" and the idea that brevity and conciseness were the very soul of this kind of writing maintained its ground long after the appearance of this collection in print. Lessing admires the severe and unadorned terseness of *Æsop*, and no doubt this has its charm. But it is suited, as M. Taine has observed, rather to the age of "gnomic" poetry than to our modern taste. Such fables, like proverbs, were the natural expressions of thought in primitive times, when poetry and philosophy alike had to be promulgated by oral tradition, and not by the printing-press. La Fontaine, in his preface, thinks it becoming to make a kind of apology for venturing to contravene the axiom of so great a critic as Patru, but hopes that "the graces of Spartan brevity will not be found so wholly incompatible with those of French poetry, but that they may often be induced to travel in harmonious companionship." The result, in his own hands, proved that he estimated rightly his own talents and the public taste.

He could be brief on occasion, and charming still. The fable of "The Mule who boasted of his Family," which he has altered from *Æsop*, is full of point as well as of playfulness, and occupies in the French only the same number of lines as in the subjoined translation:—

"A bishop's mule made boast of his high birth;
Would talk for ever of his mother's worth—

'My mother, who was once my lady's mare.'
 Much in her praise he told—
 'She could do this,—and she had travelled there.'
 He almost thought that he deserved a place,
 By virtue of his race,
 Among the great historic steeds of old,
 And took it somewhat ill
 That for a doctor's servant he was sold.
 Grown old and poor, he had to turn a mill ;
 Then he remembered that, with all his pride,
 He was a donkey by the father's side."

Even shorter in the original (for there it is comprised in twelve lines, moral included), and certainly not less perfect, is—

THE ASS WHO BORE THE RELIQUES—(v. 14).

"A certain ass, with reliques charged, received
 Much homage—to himself, as he conceived :
 Pleased at the thought, he graciously curvetted,
 Deeming that he
 For all this incense and sweet psalmody
 To his own special merits was indebted.
 A bystander, to whom the case was plain,
 Said—"Master Ass, drive from your foolish brain
 Such flattering view :
 It is the sacred burden that you bear
 To which men pay their reverence, and there
 Is all the glory due."

Learn from the foolish brute,
 Vainglorious magistrate, that men salute
 Th' official robe,—not you."

There is no evidence that the fabulist was a reader of Montaigne; but we find the latter remarking, a century before, that "he was never able to teach great

people to distinguish between the cappings and bowings which were meant for themselves personally, and those which were really meant for their office, or their suite, or their mule." There is a story told of Piron, who enjoyed, somewhat unfairly, the reputation of being the worst poet of his day, on which La Fontaine might have been thought to have founded his fable, but that it took place a generation later. Piron was sitting, one summer's day, on a bench outside the Barrier de la Conference. Nearly every one as they passed him took off their hats or bowed. "Really," thought the poet complacently to himself, "I am better known than I imagined." At last an old woman stopped and knelt before him. Following the direction of her eyes, he looked up and saw, in a niche over his head, an image of the Madonna.

Père Desbillons, the Jesuit, whose fables will come under notice hereafter, has a different version of the Ass's mistake.

"Home from the town there plodded an Ass,
With good rich dung in his panniers stowed ;
All moved aside to let him pass,
Loath to come near the unsavoury load :
'Men pay me,' said he, 'the respect that is owed !'

From the village to town the Ass was sent,
Laden with butter and flowers to sell,
Choice flowers and sweet—and all, as he went,
Pressed close to enjoy the charming smell :
'Aha !' said he, 'men love me well !'

La Fontaine, in these and others of his fables, is sufficiently severe upon the vanity which is said to be

the foible of his countrymen. In his version of Æsop's well-known fable of "The Ass in the Lion's Skin," he says by way of moral that there are a great many people in France who may serve as a familiar illustration of it—"three-fourths of whose valour lies in a warlike outside."

The following, with its cynical moral, has always been a favourite from the days of Phædrus:—

THE BITCH AND HER HOSTESS—(ii. 7).

" A Bitch, who felt sore puzzled where to lay
 The litter she expected day by day,
 Begged of a female friend,
 For this occasion only, she would lend
 Her kennel as a nursery : she consented,
 And both were well contented.
 After a while, the friend, in terms polite,
 Proposed to reassume an owner's right:
 Still for a fortnight's grace the mother pleaded—
 ‘A little longer is so greatly needed
 To help us all :
 Look at these darlings—they can hardly crawl.’
 Well,—she succeeded.
 The time soon passed, and still there was no sign
 Of turning out: more plainly than before,
 The owner asked her lodger to resign
 The borrowed quarters she could need no more :
 This time the creature showed her teeth, and said—
 ‘I'm quite prepared to give up house and bed—
 If you can turn me out.’ Her whelps, you see,
 Had grown by this time quite as strong as she."

Weiss, a German Protestant minister who Latinised his name into Pantaleon Candidus, and published a collection of Latin fables in the sixteenth century, has a

version of this in which the sufferer lays her complaint before the judge, who listens, but not caring to get himself into trouble by raising up a whole family of enemies against himself, gives the complainant full authority to eject the intruder—if she can: and the moral is, not to trust too much to fair promises, for the law will often give you very little remedy against their breach. The same lesson, in a more satirical form, is conveyed by one of the Russian fables of Kriloff:—

THE SHEEP'S PETITION.

“The Sheep before the Lion came, and prayed
 Protection from the Wolves, that havoc made
 Among the flocks. Compassion moved his breast:
 Thrice having roared, he thus his will exprest:—
 ‘We Leo, King, and so forth,—having heard
 The sore indictment by the Sheep preferred
 Against the Wolves, and touched with sympathy
 For their most sad condition, thus decree—
 If any Wolf shall any Sheep offend,
 Said Sheep hath leave said Wolf to apprehend,
 And carry him before the nearest Bear
 In the commission of the Peace—and there
 Such order as the matter may invite
 Be duly made—and Heaven defend the right !’
 So ’twas decreed. ’Tis a most curious fact,
 No Sheep hath ever yet enforced the act:
 ’Tis probable they are no more attacked:
 The Wolves now graze, it is to be inferred
 (How this agrees with them I have not heard).
 If rogues defraud, or men in power oppress—
 Go to law instantly, and get redress.”¹

Many pieces included in La Fontaine’s collection are not fables at all, in any strict sense of the word. Some of

¹ Dublin Univ. Mag., Dec. 1879.

the best are nothing more than humorous stories—admirably told. Such, for instance, is “The Faithless Trustee,” with which his ninth book opens. It is one of those many Eastern stories (adapted from Bidpai) in which cunning is met by cunning, and the only “moral” conveyed by it is that “all men are liars,” and that success consists in lying cleverly. A Persian merchant has deposited a hundred-weight of iron, during his absence on a commercial journey, in the custody of a friend. On his coming back and demanding it, he is told that a rat has eaten the whole. He does not express any incredulity, but proceeds to carry off and conceal his friend’s young son. The father is inconsolable, and is not at all disposed to give credit to the merchant’s statement that he had seen an owl carry the boy off: his boy, he observes, was more likely to have carried off the owl. The merchant says he sees nothing so strange in the circumstance: in a country where a rat eats a hundred-weight of sound metal, the owls may well be strong enough to carry off a child of half that weight. The biter is bit, and the iron restored.

Now and then La Fontaine even drops the lighter tone, which he employs so delightfully, and surprises us with a serious pathos, for which we should be quite unprepared in the author of the ‘Tales and Novels,’ but that we have seen something of it here and there in his private letters. Of this character is “The Peasant of the Danube” (xi. 7), which presents a great contrast to his lighter pieces. It is not original; he has borrowed the sketch from “Marcus Aurelius”—meaning thereby the Spanish bishop Guevara’s ‘Dial of Princes,’ or ‘Golden Book of Marcus Aurelius’—a kind of modern Cyropædia, which

supplied Montaigne also with some of his stories, but a mere literary forgery so far as the Roman emperor's name was concerned.¹ But though the idea of the picture is another's, the charm of the execution is La Fontaine's own. Much of this would be lost in any translation ; the eloquence of the declamation, fine as it is, is rather French than English, and the piece is somewhat long. The peasant has come from the banks of the Danube to plead the cause of his oppressed countrymen at Rome. His appearance is heavy and repulsive in the extreme ; he has a hideous cast in the eye, a misshapen nose, coarse thick lips, a tangled beard, and his whole person looks not much more human than that of an ill-kept bear. But when he speaks, the original author compares him to Cicero, which La Fontaine has the better taste to omit : a more apt comparison would have been to Ulysses warming into eloquence before the chiefs of Troy. He launches his bitter invectives against the rapacity of Roman governors, the abuse of all law and justice, the corrupting influence of Roman morals. Why had the Romans come to disturb a simple and happy people ? Who gave them rights over free Germans ? Let them withdraw their garrisons from a land which they were making desolate, lest Heaven in its righteous wrath should deal retribution upon Rome, and make its people in their turn the slaves of others. Then, with dramatic effect, he stops short in the full current of his remonstrance. He knows, he says, he has said enough to anger his audience. "I have done : punish my plain-

¹ La Fontaine probably got it out of some of the more recent collections—'Les Parallèles Historiques' of Cassander, or P. Boiaslau's 'Histoires Prodigieuses.'

speaking with death"—and he casts himself on the ground before them. The Senate is indeed moved, but not as the speaker had expected. They created him, says the story, a patrician on the spot; they changed their provincial officers; and they kept a record of the German peasant's speech as a model for future pleaders. La Fontaine has turned all this into a kind of fable by prefixing a "moral" to it—that "we are not to judge by appearances;" but this is only tacked on awkwardly to the narrative, which would be better without it.

Although the prevailing tone of these fables is a light-hearted cynicism—for which neither the author himself, nor yet the national French temperament so thoroughly represented in his person, must be held entirely responsible, but which belongs in great measure to fable generally—yet here and there, especially in the later books, we find passages of much earnestness and pathos. As he went on with his work, and grew more confident of carrying his readers with him, he seems to have gradually released himself from the rules of art as a fable-writer, and to have thrown more of himself, his views of men and things generally, his private opinions and tastes, into the charming pieces which he found it convenient still to put into the form of fables. "The Two Pigeons" (ix. 2), the original of which is to be found in Bidpai and Lokman, is not so much a fable as a graceful and tender idyl. It is too long for translation here, and would not perhaps very well bear translating. The peaceful and loving life which the pigeons have hitherto led together is interrupted by the resolve of one of the pair to see more of the world. In spite

of the dissuasion of his friend (it is curious that La Fontaine makes them "brothers" and not mates) he sets out upon his travels. It will be for their mutual advantage, he assures his friend; he shall have so much to tell him when he comes back, "for one who sees nothing has nothing to talk about." (The author had suffered probably from the conversation of his country neighbours.) The traveller is successively drenched in a storm, caught in a net from which he escapes with damage, and grievously hurt by a stone from the sling of a mischievous urchin; and he is glad to return to his home, to be welcomed and comforted by his less adventurous partner. The author would have all friends (and lovers) "find in each other a world ever beautiful, ever varied, ever new"—"be to yourselves everything; count all else as nothing." It is the moral so gracefully expressed in one of Lord Houghton's poems:—

"A man's best things are nearest him,—
Lie close about his feet;
It is the distant and the dim
That we are sick to greet."

The same note had been touched in one of the earlier books, in the contrast between the success of "The man who ran after Fortune," and "The man who lay in bed and waited for her."¹ Here again we find two friends, of whom the one, who has always been sighing after Fortune, at last sets forth in pursuit of her. He seeks her at Court, but though he sees her go in and out every day, and though she seems to have her favourites there, he cannot get her to smile upon him. He voyages in

¹ vii. 12.

search of her first to India and thence to Japan, and returns disappointed, after a weary round, to find the capricious goddess sitting patiently on the doorstep of his stay-at-home friend, who is in bed and fast asleep. The moral which La Fontaine prefixes to his story is only half serious—"Seek not this goddess, and she will seek you; such is the habit of her sex." But this lies merely on the surface; he lets us see throughout that he is conscious of the deeper lesson beneath.

The claims of friendship are a favourite subject. We find it illustrated by the two friends of Monotapa, (did he mean that one must go far out of France to find such an instance?) one of whom is disturbed at night by a dream in which the other appears with a distressed countenance, and rushes off to his house to inquire if anything is wrong: the other, roused from his sleep, and conceiving that his friend must have some urgent need of assistance, at once places his purse and his sword at his disposal. The possible value of the humblest friendship is dwelt upon repeatedly, as in the mutual good offices of the four curiously assorted neighbours, the Crow, the Gazelle, the Rat, and the Tortoise (xii. 15—dedicated to his dear friend Madame de la Sablière—which, like the last, is taken from an Eastern source; and in the better-known "Lion and Mouse," and "The Ant and the Dove," which he has adapted from Æsop. The author's own character, as displayed especially in his relations with Fouquet, leads to the belief that the sentiment was sincere.

In more than one instance he has availed himself of some current anecdote of the day as the foundation for his story. A singular accident had happened at the

funeral of M. Boufflers, grandfather of the great marshal. Madame de Sévigné says, in a letter to her daughter (Feb. 26, 1672), "Boufflers has killed a man after he was dead himself; he was in his coffin on the funeral-car, and they were carrying him a league out of Boufflers to bury him. His parish priest was with the corpse; the car upset, and the coffin broke the neck of the poor Curé." La Fontaine (vii. 11) describes the unfortunate priest as accompanying the corpse, chanting the usual psalms and litanies, taking care to give his deceased patron good measure, and calculating as he goes how much his dues will amount to on this lucrative occasion—"so much in hard cash, so much in wax, so much in other perquisites;" and planning in his mind how he shall lay them out—some good wine for himself, new gowns for his niece and his housekeeper—"eyeing his corpse all the time as jealously as though he thought some one might steal it from him;" when suddenly the car breaks down, and his "parishioner in lead" crushes him to death. Such is the folly of castle-building: "all our lives long," says the moralist, "we are like Chouart the Curé reckoning up the proceeds of his corpse, or Perrette investing the profits that are to come from her pail of milk. The name which he here gives to the priest—Jean Chouart—he borrows, as usual, from his favourite Rabelais. There seems no foundation whatever for the circumstantial story which some authorities give, as to its having been the real name of the parish priest of St Germain-le-Vieux, against whom the author had a private grudge, which he sought to gratify by gibbeting him in this fashion. The story of the two Fortune-tellers (vii. 15), in which a woman happening

to succeed to the garret of another (whose gains by her profession have enabled her to move into a higher position), is made to tell fortunes against her will, and becomes a fashionable oracle, is no doubt a real story of Paris life.

So, again, perhaps the most bitterly satirical of all his fables, “The Dog and his Master’s Dinner” (viii. 7), is said to have been founded on a circumstance actually witnessed in the city of Strasburg, or, as a letter from Claude Brossette to Boileau states, in London. The behaviour of the dog is not so unnatural but that it may possibly have happened more than once. The animal is carrying from the cookshop his master’s dinner, tied round his neck. He is far too well trained to think of eating it on the way. “We can teach self-restraint to dogs,” says the poet; “how strange that we cannot teach it to men!” He is attacked in the street by other dogs, who try to steal his tempting burden; for some time he defends it faithfully, but overpowered by numbers, and seeing that the dinner is sure in any case to be devoured there and then, he seizes the largest share of it for himself. La Fontaine sees in this a picture of municipal government, where every official—mayor, aldermen, and councillors alike—makes prey of the public moneys; and if any one is at first more scrupulous than his fellows, they laugh at him for a fool, so that he often ends by being foremost in the plunder. The rapacity of princes and nobles was less offensive to La Fontaine’s mind than the peculations of plebeians.

He founded another of those short satirical pieces which appear in this collection, though they can hardly be called fables, on a story then current in England as

to the discovery of a strange animal in the moon. It was said that Sir Paul Neal, one of the Fellows of the Royal Society, had been startled, in the course of his observations with the telescope, by the appearance on the moon's disc of a creature something like an elephant—which turned out to be a mouse which had got between the lenses. Such a mistake is so flagrantly impossible, that there can be no doubt it was the invention of some malicious wit in order to raise a laugh at the expense of the astronomers. Samuel Butler, the author of '*Hudibras*,' has left us a fragmentary effusion in verse upon the subject; and it is not impossible that he was the inventor of the story. La Fontaine, in his handling of it, far from sneering at the possible mistakes of science, takes occasion to congratulate his neighbours of England who could find leisure for such pursuits. For England was then (1677) at peace with all the great Powers, while Louis of France was carrying on war with Holland, Spain, and Germany. We detect in the writer's playful verse the weariness which the subjects of the great king had begun to feel of the military glories which cost them all so dear. "No doubt," says the poet, who had much of the courtier in his composition,—"the goddess Victory, who had a personal affection for Louis, would still follow his steps, go where he would; but if Charles of England could only see his way to mediate between the belligerents"—as just then all were hoping that he would—"what a genuine triumph, worthy of a great monarch, that would be for him! Was the peaceful career of Augustus less glorious than the famous campaigns of the first Cæsar? Happy—too happy—people of England! When would

peace come, to leave his own countrymen free, like them, to devote themselves to the fair pursuits of art and science!"

One fable, the motive of which was personal, has been discovered amongst his unpublished pieces: it is another instance of his grateful feeling towards his early patron Fouquet, and is said to have been suppressed in order not to risk incurring the displeasure of Colbert, who had probably seen it when circulated in manuscript (as was the case with many of the author's pieces), and who would have been impatient of any expression of sympathy with the discarded Minister.¹ It is called "The Fox and the Squirrel:" it is by no means one of his best, and is scarcely worth translating entire, but its subject gives it an interest, if the account of its origin and suppression be true. Fouquet's heraldic device, it should be said, was a squirrel. The Fox, in this fable, mocks at the Squirrel, who is vainly trying to shelter himself from a thunderstorm by rolling himself up after his fashion. "You are too fond," says the Fox, "of climbing into lofty places, too near the thunder: I, who am content with a hole, shall be safe, while I see you beaten to powder." He was eating a stolen pullet with much enjoyment as he spoke. At length "the wrath of Heaven pardoned the Squirrel;" the storm ceased, and the victim escaped with a drenching. But meanwhile a hunter had tracked the Fox to his hole, and by the help of his dogs soon unearthed him. The Squirrel saw him flying before his enemies, and speedily overtaken and killed. "He saw—but he did not laugh, schooled by his own misfortunes." Unless Colbert had been con-

¹ Lacroix, 'Œuvres Ined. de J. de la Fontaine,' p. 6.

scious that he himself was the Fox, it is hard to conceive his taking offence at so innocent a fable.

“The Bear and the Two Companions” (v. 20) has an historical interest, as having been employed by the Emperor Frederick the Third in reply to the ambassador sent by Louis XI. of France to ask him to join that king against the Duke of Burgundy. The story is told by Philip de Commynes.¹ The French proposal was that Frederick should at once seize all the fiefs which the duke held of the Empire, while Louis should enter upon those which were held of France. The emperor replied by quoting, with some variations, the old Æsopic fable. Three travellers (*Æsop* and *La Fontaine* have only two) being without money to pay their tavern score, induced their host to buy from them the skin of a notoriously savage bear which infested the neighbourhood, and which they undertook to kill. They met the bear, who showed no inclination to part with his skin. Instead of attacking him, one of the companions ran back to the town, one got up into a tree, and the third lay down and feigned to be dead. The bear came and smelt him very closely; but in accordance with the prejudice which beasts of prey are supposed to entertain against devouring a dead body, left him unharmed, and went back into the forest. The man in the tree got down, and asked his companion what the bear had said to him, as he appeared to whisper very close in his ear. “He told me,” replied the other, “never to sell a bear’s skin before he was killed.” “With this fable,” says the old historian, “did the emperor pay off our king, without any other word of reply to his envoy.” The fable

¹ *Memoirs*, iv. ch. 3.

will also be remembered by the epigram in the ‘Anti-Jacobin’ on the Paris Loan, called the “Loan upon England,” proposed to be raised in 1797:—

“The Paris cits, a patriotic band,
Advance their cash on British freehold land :
But let the speculating rogues beware ;
They’ve bought the skin—but who’s to kill the bear ?”

The twelfth and last book of the Fables is dedicated to the young Duke of Burgundy, grandson of the king, then about twelve years old. This prince, who died in his thirtieth year, was the pupil of Fénelon, a good classical scholar, and altogether a youth of more promise than most of the Bourbon princes. There was, as has been said, a lapse of fifteen years between the publication of the eleventh and this last book, which is a collection of pieces thrown off occasionally during the interval, and of unequal merit. It would appear, indeed, from the “epilogue” to Book XI., that the author did not at that time contemplate any addition to his work. In both these latter books, indeed, we often miss the charming ease and grace of his earlier compositions, and the author was perhaps himself conscious that his hand had lost something of its cunning.

The fable (if we are so to call it) with which this final series opens, is interesting as an amusing comparison of the author’s special friends, the animals which we call irrational, with his human fellow-creatures—of course to the advantage of the former. It is called “The Companions of Ulysses ;” and it rests upon the well-known story told in the *Odyssey* of their transformation into beasts by the spells of Circe. But the moral is by no means

what we must conceive to have been the moral intended by Homer—that man may degrade himself into the beast by yielding to sensuality. The good-humoured satire of this apologue points in a different direction: that man, if judged from the beasts' point of view, is not so much better than they. Ulysses has obtained from the enchantress permission for his transformed companions to resume their original shapes. But they one and all refuse. He who has been changed into a lion prefers to remain a king among brutes to going back to be a simple citizen of Ithaca; he who has taken the shape of a bear is highly offended at Ulysses' remarks upon the ungainliness of his present appearance—he “who had once been so handsome!” His shape, he replies, is what a bear's ought to be; and who made Ulysses a judge of the comparative beauty of bears and men? At any rate, the lady-bears find no fault with him. The hero next addresses himself to his comrade who has become a wolf, and tries to shame him out of his carnivorous propensities, which make him a terror to the fair shepherdesses of the neighbourhood; but the wolf retorts that man kills and eats as many sheep as wolves do,—nay, more, that men prey upon each other; in short, that, “culprit for culprit, one had better be a wolf than a man.” All, in fine, when appealed to, decline the offer to have their human form restored to them.

The humour of the French author in this fable is, however, by no means original. Giambattista Gelli, an Italian, had some few years previously published a satirical effusion called “*La Circe*,” which had been translated into French, and with which La Fontaine was not probably acquainted. Gelli's treatment of the subject

is indeed the more humorous of the two. He makes Ulysses address himself in the first instance to one of his companions whom the enchantress has turned into an oyster, but who is quite contented with his stationary life. He has not the power of locomotion,—true: but all desire for change of place, he argues, proceeds from the consciousness of some want which he for his part never feels, having within his immediate reach all that he needs. The mole, to whom Ulysses next appeals, will not be persuaded that his lack of sight is any real imperfection: his senses are complete, so far as they are suited to his species. If other moles saw, he would like to see; but indeed what use would sight be to him, who passes his life underground? Has Ulysses himself any particular desire to have the quality of brilliancy, like a star, or wings like a bird? The serpent, the lion, the hare, and the buck, all make somewhat similar replies. The dog, with a kindly sympathy for man, even expresses his regret that Ulysses should have missed the advantage of a like transformation: the bitch can find only one thing that would tempt her to become a woman—that then she should be able to talk. Only the elephant, sagacious animal that he always is, accepts the offer to have his human shape restored to him, because so “he shall have universal ideas, instead of those particular ones to which an animal’s knowledge is limited.”

Fénelon has worked upon the same idea in one of his “Dialogues of the Dead,” in the scene between Ulysses and Gryllus—one of his comrades who has been changed into a swine. Gryllus is quite content with his present state of existence, and has no desire to become a man

again. If his figure is ugly, as Ulysses assures him, it is of little consequence to one who never looks into a glass; and Ulysses, in his wanderings, would have been very glad of a thick tough hide like his to supply the place of clothes. He needs neither tailor, nor barber, nor cook, nor architect: as for the pleasures of eloquence and poetry, for his part he had rather grunt. Ulysses asks him if he has become so brutalised as to despise wisdom, which lifts men almost to a level with the gods? On the contrary, Gryllus replies, it is wisdom which has taught him to despise men. Let Ulysses go back to his beloved Ithaca; "a pig finds his country wherever acorns grow," says Gryllus, in amusing travesty of the classical boast that "to the brave man every land becomes his native soil."¹ Both Gelli and Fénelon have carried out the satire with even more humour, though certainly at much greater length, than La Fontaine, who has but lightly touched it.

In some of these last fables he has availed himself of the privilege of an old public favourite to speak his mind more freely than before upon the foreign policy of France. Though he carried his loyalty as a subject to a point which we should now call obsequiousness, we have seen that he had no sympathy with the royal thirst for military glory. There is no mistaking the good-humoured satire upon the rival potentates of Europe conveyed in the following:—

THE ELEPHANT AND JUPITER'S APE.

"The Elephant and the Rhinoceros
Once for the empire of the beasts contended :

¹ "Omne solum fortis patria."

So high the quarrel rose,

By single fight alone it could be ended.

The day was fixed, the lists prepared ; when, lo !

News came that in the sky

Jupiter's Ape (whose name historians know

As Gille) was drawing nigh.

'Ha !' thought the Elephant, 'no doubt

His master Jupiter has sent him out

On special embassy to my dominions.'

Quite proud, he now awaited Master Gille,

Still hovering on his pinions,

And took it rather ill

He was so slow. But down he came at last,

Landed, and bowed politely as he passed.

'Now for the audience,' said the monarch—'Eh !'

The Ape, it seemed, had not a word to say !

Among the gods, this duel to be fought

Had scarce aroused the interest that it ought :

'Twixt elephants and flies

Is small distinction to heaven's larger eyes.

His majesty had therefore to begin : :

'My cousin Jupiter,' said he,

'From his high throne in heaven will shortly see

A combat of high mark ; whichever win,

'Twill be right royal sport

For the spectators of the Olympian court.'

'What combat ?' asked the envoy, with a frown.

'What ?' said the Elephant ; 'have you not heard

How the Rhinoceros disputes my crown,

And Elephantis is all stirred

(You know our kingdom and its high renown ?)

Resolved to put Rhinoceropolis down ?'

'Sire,' said the Ape, 'your information flatters—

I'm charmed to hear the names ; but really we

Can't much concern ourselves, you see,

In our vast line of business, with such matters.'

Surprised, abashed, the monarch stammered out—

'Indeed! then pray what have you come about?'

'Just to decide a claim

Between some ants, about a bit of straw—

That's why I came.

We have to look to all things; your affair

Has not yet come before our council there;

Under Olympian law

The claims of great and small rank just the same.'"

A writer of fables is not bound to be consistent, so long as his stories are pointed and amusing; and certainly no one would expect consistency from Jean de la Fontaine. In an earlier fable he has taken a very different view of this doctrine of equality. The Rat had undertaken to apply it to the case of himself and the Elephant. He was astonished people should admire the Elephant so much—a vast bulk only adapted to frighten children! "We Rats," says he, "don't think a grain less of ourselves than of the Elephants." He might have gone on in this free and independent strain some time, but suddenly the Cat made a leap upon him, "and made him understand in a moment that a Rat was not an Elephant."

Another good-humoured burlesque on the question of royal precedence may be found in the fourth fable of this last book—"The Two Goats." The French readers of the time would well remember the ceremonious meeting which took place between the ambassadors of France and Spain in 1659 on the Isle of Pheasants, in the river Bidassoa, which formed the boundary of the two countries (because neither would compromise his royal master's dignity by going a step on either side), where the treaty of the Pyrenees was concluded. The introduction to this lively fable premises that lady-goats, like others of their

sex, are fond of “airing their caprices” in very dangerous places. And this is what follows :—

“ Two lady-goats, bent on emancipation
 (Whose fair white feet won rival admiration),
 Left the low pastures, each by separate ways ;
 But met by chance upon a river’s bank
 Spanned by a single plank—
 Two weasels scarce could pass, the story says.
 The torrent’s rushing flow,
 The depth that yawned below,
 Might well have daunted e’en these Amazons ;
 But, spite of danger, both stepped on at once,
 Fronting each other on the giddy track,
 Disdaining to turn back.
 Methought I saw Great Louis once again
 Step on the Isle of Conference, to meet
 Philip of Spain :
 So moved with cautious feet
 Those rivals fair,
 So, step by step, advanced upon the plank
 That seemed to hang in air,
 Too proud to yield an inch of place or rank ;
 For both claimed high descent :
 One from that peerless goat
 That Polyphemus to his mistress sent ;
 One from an ancestress of no less note—
 White Amalthea, name renowned,
 Who suckled Jove, as classic legends tell.
 Neither would budge ; so both together fell,
 And both were drowned.”

One fable, however, in this book reads almost like a recantation. In one of the earlier books we have a short and rather commonplace version of the old *apologue* to be found in *Phædrus* and *Æsop*, called “The Sun and the Frogs.” His majesty the Sun was about to take a

wife. Such illustrious marriages are commonly the occasion of much public rejoicing. But the Frogs in the fable think otherwise. "Suppose he has children," they argue : "we find it hard enough to live under one Sun sometimes ; half-a-dozen Suns will dry up ditches and marshes everywhere, and we poor wretches shall find no water—unless it be in the Styx." "And for my part," says the author by way of moral, "I think the Frogs were right." He is careful to throw the burden of this protest upon *Æsop* ; still, we may suppose that he did not altogether disagree with his original as to the multiplication of ruling families being a very doubtful good to the subject classes. But in this last book we have a fable bearing the same title, but conceived in quite a different spirit. The Sun still represents the "Great Monarch" (Louis XIV. bore the sun as his device) ; the Frogs—"the Aquatic Republic"—are the Dutch, who had seen with dismay the conquests of the French king in Flanders, and, in alarm for their own independence, had now joined Spain against France. The national pride of Louis and his subjects was aroused against the little republic, whose change of side they regarded as not only insolent but ungrateful ; and the war with Holland that followed was as popular (and as impolitic) as our own war with America. La Fontaine was carried away by the national feeling. This second fable of "The Sun and the Frogs" was translated, or rather adapted, from the Latin original of the Jesuit father Commire. There is very little point in it ; such interest as it has is historical rather than literary. The citizens of the Aquatic Republic, according to the writers, had long enjoyed the protection of the Sun ; war and disaster, thanks to him, had been

unknown to them. Suddenly these “daughters of the marsh” cabal against their great benefactor, and send envoys to all quarters to urge them to resist the increasing power of the great luminary who threatens to consume them all. The moral warns them to hold their peace; for if once the Sun’s wrath is roused, the Frogs, in their exhausted marshes, will be the first to repent it.

We find a political warning of the same kind in the next fable, “The League of the Rats.” Here a Mouse, who goes in deadly fear of the great cat Raminagrobis, appeals for help against the common enemy to her neighbours the Rats. It is their concern as well as hers, the petitioner assures them; for when this terrible Cat has finished up the Mice, he will unquestionably begin upon the Rats. So the Rats form a league, and march out against Raminagrobis, “taking each a bit of cheese in their knapsacks,”—possibly a contemptuous allusion to the Dutch. But Raminagrobis has meanwhile got hold of the Mouse, and shows no disposition to let it go. He only growls when the allies show themselves, and makes a few steps to meet them, upon which the Rats make their retreat in good time. Plainly, to interfere with the designs of the great conqueror is a dangerous policy.

La Fontaine was, as we have seen, an enthusiastic admirer of Rabelais, though the genius of the two writers was essentially different; and he seems to have expected his readers to have been as familiar with the works of that grand buffoon as he was himself. The Rabelaisian names occur continually amongst his characters, and he evidently assumes that we shall recognise them as old acquaintances. Perrin Dandin the lawyer, Jean Chouart the parish priest (though in Rabelais he is a gold-beater),

Dindenaut the sheep-seller, Martin Baton the donkey-man—all come upon his stage expecting a welcome, and as though no introduction were required. It is tacitly assumed that the visionary campaigns of King Picrochole of Lerna are as well known to us as those of Pyrrhus of Epirus. The names given to his animals, when he gives them a name at all, are taken from the same source : Robin-Mouton the Sheep, Grippemenaud the Cat, Robillard the Rat. It is from Rabelais that he has learnt to introduce the Crow as Maître Corbeau, the Wolf as Messire Loup, the Lion as Monsieur du Lion, the Bear as Monsieur L'Ours, the Pig as Dom Porceau. The announcement that Gille, the learned ape, has arrived in the city “in three boats,” is the old jest of the voyage of Gargantua’s great mare on which he rode to Paris, and which came by sea “in three carraques and a brigantine.”¹ He has taken from the same pages, in several cases, if not the subject of his fables, yet some characteristic points in their treatment. The story of the pedantic schoolmaster, who harangues the drowning boy at some length before he drags him out of the Seine (i. 19), though a form of it may be found in the Indian fables, is probably borrowed directly from the scene in which Gargantua sees the monk hanging in a tree by his head, “like Absalom,” and preaches to him a long sermon before he will help him down.² So in the version which

¹ Rabelais, i. 15. La Font., ix. 3.

² Rabelais, Garg. i. 42. The fable occurs in a somewhat different form in the Commentaries of St Augustin. A man having fallen into a well, a passer-by stops to inquire of him very particularly how he met with the accident. The other begs him to spare his questions, and to help him out. Augustin founders upon it the moral, that we had far better study how to get rid of sin, than busy ourselves with the inquiry how original sin came to exist.

we find here of the old Roman fable, the personage to whose support all the various members have to contribute becomes the “Master Gaster” whom we find in Rabelais—“the first Master of Arts in the world.” “The Three Wishes” (vii. 6), which so charmingly recommends moderation in our desires, is drawn, no doubt, from the same source, rather than from Marie de France. So also in the amusing fable (if so it can be called) of “Mercury and the Woodcutters,” which forms the prologue to Book V., dedicated to his patron the Duke de Bouillon, La Fontaine had evidently before him the expanded version given by Rabelais, and not the older and simpler form attributed to Æsop. A woodman has dropped his axe into the river, and appeals to Jupiter, with many tears and lamentations, to restore to him the tool on which his daily bread depends. Mercury is despatched to his aid, and makes trial of the man’s honesty by producing from the water first a golden axe and then a silver one, and asking him if either of these were what he had lost. The wood-cutter rejects them both, as having no claim to either, upon which Mercury makes a third dive and brings up the real article, which the owner thankfully recognises; and the god, in reward for his simple honesty, presents him with the other two. So far our author is in accord with Æsop, but in the sequel he has followed Rabelais. In the older fable, a second wood-cutter, who has heard of his comrade’s good fortune, drops his axe into the same stream, appeals in like manner to the gods, and is at once offered a golden axe, which he eagerly clutches; but Mercury not only withholds this from him, but refuses to fish him out his own. In the modern story, a whole gang of wood-cutters

determine to take advantage of the opportunity : all lose their axes, and besiege Jupiter so loudly all at once with prayers and lamentations, that he “does not know which to listen to first,” but sends down Mercury again to put a stop to their complaints. Each of them in succession receives the offer of the golden axe, and unhesitatingly claims it as his own ; but the god only makes use of it, in La Fontaine’s version, to give each of them a good knock on the head ; in Rabelais, to cut off all their heads in succession.¹ It is from this story in Rabelais that he has taken the idea of the Council of Gods, introduced into his fable of “The Ape and the Elephant,” as being called upon to settle most the trifling disputes amongst the inhabitants of earth—even “between two parties of ants about a blade of grass.” “Pest on it !” Jupiter is made to say to his council in Rabelais,—“have we not plenty to do without looking after lost hatchets ?” It should be said that the Curé of Meudon has disfigured the story with much of his usual grossness, which entirely disappears in La Fontaine’s page. Whatever objection may lie against his ‘Tales,’ the ‘Fables’ are irreproachable on this point.

Enough has been already said to show that for the moral teaching of these Fables the author is no more responsible than he is, except in a very few cases, for the invention of them. He adopted the morality as he found it. No doubt it suited, on the whole, his own ideas of—we cannot say the duties, for to him duty was a word of no significance, but—the necessary relations of life. He lived in the days of a great monarchy which was in many of its features a despotism.

¹ Rabelais, Garg. i. 33.

He quite understood what was meant by obedience to a king ; but the liberties of subjects were hardly dreamt of in his philosophy. He is monarchist to the backbone. Kings are his favourite heroes,—though under the mask of beasts of prey ; and he takes a sort of pride in their royal caprices. For the middle-class—the merchants, the lawyers, and the farmers—he has very little sympathy indeed. He does not care if the Ass suffers,—he is a stupid beast, and deserves no better fate. He retains very much of the old feudal contempt for honest money-making. The Banker's gold will only cause him restless nights—he had rather sing with the independent Cobbler ; and when he gives us a lesson of prudence in the Ant, we cannot help feeling that, had he not been bound by the old *Æsopic* moral, he had rather have sided with the Bohemian Grasshopper.

CHAPTER V.

LATER FABLE-WRITERS: HOUDARD DE LA MOTTE.

LA FONTAINE stands almost alone amongst his contemporaries as a writer of Fables in his own language. A few specimens are to be found here and there in the literary correspondence of the time, as Boileau's "Death and the Woodman" and "The Oyster and the Lawyers," which latter was inserted in a letter to the king, ten years earlier than the publication of La Fontaine's on the same subject. The witty and versatile Menage—a promising lawyer metamorphosed into a very unclerical abbé—had composed several in Latin. The best is his paraphrase of Phædrus's fable of "The Old Lion," which is in some points more graphic than La Fontaine's (iii. 14). In Latin also, with an elegance that showed a perfect command of the language, the Jesuit Commire threw off those versions from the old fable-writers with which he relieved his labours as a theological professor. The prose apologetics which Fénelon wrote for the instruction of his pupil, the young Duke of Burgundy, though ingenious, are lengthy, and are more to be praised for their high tone of morality than for their point.

Eustace Lenoble, Baron de St George, a political

pamphleteer and somewhat voluminous writer, whose careless and self-indulgent life much resembled La Fontaine's, has in his fables perhaps approached him most closely, here and there, in felicity of expression. He often made use of the same originals; as, for instance, in "The Wolf and the House-dog," which latter animal he represents as English.¹ The speech with which the Wolf closes the interview is a bolder defence of his own Bohemian life than La Fontaine ventured upon. "As for me, who decline to sell myself, I have no wish at all to follow you: I much prefer to wander in the woods, and to enjoy a vagabond liberty, than to go and live in London as a citizen-slave." But Lenoble's fables are too diffuse for translation. The most severely satirical is "The Court Friend," a variation of the old favourite already noticed as "The Boy and the Schoolmaster."² In Lenoble's version the Fox has fallen into a well, where the Wolf, his courtier-friend, discovers him, and is much interested to know how he got there. The Fox naturally begs him to spare his questions and help him out, as he is drowning. But the Wolf proceeds leisurely to remind him that life is a thing of very little value,—a mere tissue of disappointments and vexation; that a happy life is a blessing it is vain to hope for; and ends by going his way with the parting words—"Adieu! may Heaven console you!" Probably we have here not only a satire upon worldly friendships, but also, as in Gargantua's sermon in Rabelais, a sneer at the consolations of the Church. Lenoble fell gradually from bad to worse, and was imprisoned on a charge of forgery. It was in prison that he wrote most of his

¹ See p. 85.

² La Font., i. 19: see p. 129.

fables. After obtaining his liberty, he died in obscurity, a mere bookseller's hack.

One of the prettiest fables of this date is by Etienne Pavillon, a member of the French Academy a few years later than La Fontaine. He calls it "Honour, Fire, and Water." It has been remarked that, in the later Fabulists, abstractions such as the Virtues and the Vices, the elements and properties of matter, begin to take the place of the birds and beasts who figure almost exclusively in the earlier drama of *apologue*. A brief summary of Pavillon's fable will give its point sufficiently.

"Once upon a time, Honour, Fire, and Water set out to travel in company. As it was to be an expedition of pleasure and discovery, they foresaw the possibility of their getting separated on the road, and made arrangements by which, in such case, they might be sure of meeting again. Fire explained, that although in general he was visible enough, yet sometimes he was concealed from view. 'But even if you miss my light,' said he, 'wherever you see smoke you will be sure to find me.' Water also instructed his friends as to certain marks by which his whereabouts could be readily ascertained,—where the herbage was greenest, and the evening mists rose in the air. It remained for Honour to give his companions some clue of the same kind. But he confessed, with a sigh, that the only charge he could give them was to keep him constantly in view, and never to lose sight of him at all. 'Watch me,' said he, 'with the eyes of Argus; for if once you lose me, you will never find me more.'"

The supremacy of La Fontaine in his own province of literature was freely admitted by almost all who followed

him. His reputation grew more rapidly in the next generation than in his own. "La Fontaine," says the Abbé Le Monnier, speaking for himself and his fellow-authors, "is our rector, but we may perhaps be permitted to rank among his curates." Yet there are some of these less celebrated labourers in the same field whose work, here and there, scarcely suffers by comparison with his.

Foremost among these successors, at an interval of nearly half a century, stands Antoine Houdard de la Motte. Like La Fontaine, he had at one time been led to think that he had a vocation for a religious life. He had first of all tried the law: disappointed at the failure of a tragedy which he had written for the stage, and mistaking mortified ambition for penitence, he entered La Trappe. He soon found its discipline ill-suited to his temperament, and returned to the world to write both tragedies and comedies with greater success. In 1710 he was elected into the Academy; soon afterwards he lost his sight, but not his good spirits or good humour. He was a man of paradoxes. Though a successful poet, he wrote a diatribe against poetry as an unnatural and artificial abuse of language. Without any knowledge of Greek, he undertook an abridgment of Homer's 'Iliad,' reducing the twenty-four books into twelve. He admits that he had taken considerable liberties with his original; but the Greeks, he remarks, must have been great talkers, and he considered that he had improved his author by cutting him down. Rousseau (who had been his unsuccessful rival at the Academy election) did not miss the opportunity, and wrote a good many epigrams on La Motte and his Homer. "The

abridgment," he said, "was really much longer to read than the original; but the public would easily make it shorter by not reading it at all." This literary vagary of La Motte's led also to an amusing battle on paper between Madame Dacier and himself. He compared her violent terms of abuse to "those charming Greek particles in Homer—of no particular meaning or value, but useful to emphasise and ornament the verse."

But it is as a writer of Fables that we have to deal with him here. Though a sincere admirer of his great predecessor, he does not hesitate to criticise him freely. His strictures are often judicious and acute. He objects, on principles of literary taste, to La Fontaine's frequent practice (borrowed, it should be said, from some of his most eminent predecessors) of prefixing to his fable the moral lesson which he means to convey. "Fable," La Motte argues, "ought to make the moral truth which it inculcates arise spontaneously in the minds of those to whom it is narrated; otherwise, the teaching becomes direct and undisguised, and this is fatal to the interest of allegory, which professes to veil it." It is only the want of intelligence in the public, he goes on to say, which requires the moral to be stated in words at all, even at the end: if placed at the beginning, it destroys all the reader's pleasure in the story, and does not leave him the satisfaction of working out the lesson for himself. And he gives as an instance of this mistake in art, La Fontaine's fable of "The Lark and her Young Ones." He considers that in some cases La Fontaine has grouped his characters unnaturally; as, for instance, in the strange association of the Lion with the Goat, Heifer, and Sheep as a hunting-party. His criticism of the "Two Pigeons,"

usually considered one of the author's best pieces, is not without plausibility. There is, he observes, a confusion of ideas which leaves it doubtful what is the moral really implied,—whether it is the dangers of travel, the unrest of friendship, or the pleasure of return after long absence. The Pigeon who is weary of the peaceful monotony of his home life, and leaves his companion with a resolve to see the world, only returns because in his travels he meets with rough weather and dangers from vultures and boys. To point the moral which we must presume the author to have intended, says the critic, the restless Pigeon should not have been driven back to his home and his friend by adverse fortune, but should have found all the pleasures of the wider world vapid and unsatisfying, and so have returned to seek his true happiness in the simpler charms of domestic life.

La Motte claims for his own fables, which he dedicates to the young king Louis XIV., the Regent Orleans, and the Queen of Prussia, the merit of originality. But in this he is scarcely honest, as many of them are palpably borrowed from the Arabian stories assigned to the sage Lokman, and from Marie de France—collections very little known in France at that time. The following are some of his best, and the first is probably original :—

THE CLOCK AND THE SUN-DIAL (iii. 2).

“ A pert young Clock began to shout
(He was just set up) to the Dial below—
‘ Well, what’s the hour ? I can’t find out
From you ;’ the Dial said—‘ I don’t know.’
‘ Then what’s the use of your Dial-ship, pray,
If you can’t tell folks the time of day ? ’

'I wait,' said he, 'for the Sun to shine ;
Knowledge of time is his,—not mine.'

'Wait if you will,' said the Clock, 'but I
Have nothing to do with the Sun ;
Just a turn of the hand, some once a-week,
Is all the help that ever I seek
To keep me going—so perfectly
My hands their courses run.

Hark ! I'm going to strike—now listen to me—
One—two—three—four ! that's just the time ;'

And, as the Clock beat out his chime,
The Sun came forth in his brilliancy ;
The clouds and shadows dispersed apace,
And the light shone full on the Dial's face.

It marked the time—'twas nearly five ;
'My child,' said the Dial, 'you want repair ;
You've always an answer ready to give,
But those who trust you will badly fare :

Take pattern from me, good youth ;
When I don't see clear, I say I don't know ;
I speak but little—you call me slow—
But what I speak is truth.'"

THE PARROT (i. 3).

"A mourning husband, who had lost his spouse,
Resolved, by way of consolation,
To cheer his lonely house,
To buy a parrot of some education ;
So it could talk, the sense was not much matter—
It would at least remind him of her chatter.
So to a bird-seller's he took his way,
Who of such wares displayed a varied store ;
Songsters of plumage gay,
Nightingales, starlings, jays, and ravens hoar.
And parrots by the score.
The very worst of them, the man protested,

Was a most clever bird,
 Could call ‘Another bottle !’ if requested ;
 And here was one
 Could mimic all the street-cries he had heard ;
 Another screamed for ‘Breakfast !’ in shrill tone,
 And bade the scullion ‘put the kettle on.’
 Our friend, embarrassed with so wide a choice,
 Kept cheapening such as had the clearest voice ;

At last he spied

One in a corner crouched, with head aside.

‘So, Mr Sulky ! you sit there alone—

What is the reason, pray,

You have no word to say ?’

The parrot winked, and said in solemn tone—

‘I think the more.’

This struck his fancy more than all before :

‘Wise bird !’ he thought. ‘Prythee, my friend,’ he said,

How much for him ?’ ‘Agreed—the bargain’s made.’

The man was quite content with what he heard :

Surely so wise a bird

Must have unusual powers of conversation !

He took him home, and listened day by day

To hear what Poll would say ;

But, to his consternation,

In spite of teaching, petting, threats, or praise,

Nothing came out but that eternal phrase—

‘I think the more.’

At last the owner cursed him for a bore :

‘You prating fool !—yet greater fool was I,

To judge of merit by one cuckoo-cry !”

THE SPECTACLES (iii. 3).

“Great Jove one day

With nectar primed, incontinently gay,

Would make a present to mankind :

So Momus, charged his bounty to convey,

Sped down on wings of wind.

'Come hither, happy mortals !' cried the god :
 'Jove, from his blest abode,
 Pitying your purblind eyes,
 Of his free gift this remedy supplies.'
He oped his wallet, and there tumbled out
 Spectacles, new and bright,
Enough for all : at once, with vast delight,
Each seized a pair, and with a joyous shout
 Thanked Jove for this new aid to sight.
But, with this gift though all were so contented,
 Each wearer saw,
Not in accordance with great Nature's law,
But as his own new optics represented.
These glasses made things blue : with those 'twas red :
 These others made them green :
 In short, the world was seen
In very various colours : still, 'twas said,
Each man was charmed with his own special pair,
 Whate'er their hue :
Each vowed he saw the clearest of all there,
And tasted in the false the pleasure of the true."

It may be noticed that in these fables the author has not only observed his own rule of not forestalling the moral, but has even omitted putting it into words at all, leaving it to the reader's intelligence to draw the obvious lesson for himself. This has grown to be very generally the practice of modern writers ; and, if the fable itself have sufficient point, it would seem to be the perfection of such literature for a cultivated age.

CHAPTER VI.

RICHER—DESBILLONS—AUBERT—LE MONNIER.

AMONG the French fable-writers of the eighteenth century, Henri Richer, Advocate to the Parliament of his native city of Rouen, is one of the earliest in date and the most prolific. He soon gave up the bar for literature, and published twelve books of fables, the greater number of which have at least the merit of originality. Many are very prettily turned, but there is a want of the racy vigour which marks the work of La Fontaine. Their moral is generally good-humoured and refined—a lesson in social life rather than in graver matters of conduct. “The Stilts” is a fair specimen, though in this case the idea can hardly be called original: it is only a variation of the fable whose application is said to have proved fatal to *Æsop*—“The Floating Sticks” of La Fontaine,¹ though it must be allowed that Richer has very much improved the setting of the moral:—

“ ‘What sight is this which meets my wondering eyes ?
Two giants—and their heads quite touch the skies !’
So spoke a rustic, gaping with amaze :

¹ iv. 10: see p. 16.

Two children upon stilts was what he spied,
 Stalking along the mountain side,
 Who showed like Titans to his distant gaze.
 'Go closer,' said a friend; the man moved nearer;
 With every step he took, their height grew less;
 Who, to the distant eye,
 Had seemed some twenty fathoms, at a guess,
 Now that he saw them clearer,
 Were barely four feet high.
 So the great man we worship at a distance
 Is but a dwarf save for his stilts' assistance."

The following is borrowed from Lenoble, but Richer has recast it in a much livelier form:—

THE SNAKE AND THE HEDGEHOG.

"Soon as he felt the winter frosts begin,
 A Hedgehog begged a Snake to take him in:
 'Twill be a deed of charity,' said he;—
 'I'm perishing with cold, as you may see;
 And then
 In this great hole how lonely you will be,
 All by yourself, till summer comes again!
 So take me under cover—
 I'm first-rate company, as you'll discover.'
 The Snake consented,
 And very soon repented.
 The Hedgehog proved a most unpleasant guest;
 Curled himself up into a horrid ball,
 Rolled here and there, with no regard at all
 For his poor hostess, who could get no rest,
 And even pricked her side
 With those sharp-pointed quills upon his hide.
 Vainly she made complaint;—
 It was the brute's amusement so to do.
 Such conduct would provoke a very saint:
 At last she said—'Behave yourself, or go!'

'Go!' said the brute—'not I! I'm here at present,
And here I'll stay:
Go out yourself, if you find things unpleasant.'

In a companion one may find a master.
A solitary life is dull, you say:
Life with a Hedgehog is a worse disaster."

The Jesuit colleges continued to produce Latin fables which were very fair imitations of Phædrus. The art was much cultivated amongst their pupils; and in 1745 a volume was published by the College Louis le Grand, at Bourges, containing a collection of these literary exercises by the students, many of them young men of rank. The fathers themselves set the example, as has been seen already; and the fables of Francis Joseph Desbillons may bear comparison with those of Commire. He was a simple, good man, unsuited for the France of his days. He quitted the country on the expulsion of his Order by the royal edict, and took refuge at Mannheim under the protection of the Elector of Bavaria. Fable had not wholly lost its ancient province of reading lessons to the powerful; and few who knew the state of the French lower orders in France would miss the application (though the moral is only hinted) of "The Peasant and his Ass." The Latin is pretty, but Desbillons evidently enjoyed his powers of composition, and gives us rather too much of it. The reader must be content with its skeleton in prose:—

A Peasant was driving home his Ass, already quite sufficiently loaded. As he passed a thicket of brushwood by the roadside, he bethought himself that a few fagots would be very useful, and could not add materially

to the Ass's burden. He cut some, and laid them on the creature's back, who went on as patiently as before. Next he passed a heap of stones, and picked out two that looked useful for building : they were not so very heavy, and could surely not make much difference ; he added them to the load, and the poor Ass summoned all his little remaining strength, and struggled on. The Peasant was delighted ; never had he seen this good servant of his do his work so cheerfully. The day was growing hot : he took off his coat, and threw it on the Ass's back—that could be no weight at all. But now at last the Ass fell down, and, to his master's horror, never got up again,—he was dead.

France saw the fulfilment of the Jesuit's fable at the Revolution—but with this difference, that it was not the Ass who was the victim.

Jean Louis Aubert (several of whose fables Desbillons paraphrased in Latin) enjoyed in his day almost as great popularity as La Fontaine. He is generally known by the prefix "Abbé," for he had taken the tonsure though he never entered the priesthood. He published his Fables in 1756 ; in a few years they ran though six editions, and were translated into various languages. So highly were they praised and admired, that we are told there was hardly a fashionable *salon* without its fire-screens embellished with the text and subjects of some of his fables. This, combined with the flattery of Voltaire, rather spoilt him. He had praised Voltaire's tragedies ; in return for which their gratified author had written him a letter placing him on a level with La Fontaine. Aubert's theory was, that later fable-writers had failed because of their slavish imitation of their great

predecessor ; and that they would have had more chance of success if they had been more original in style and subject, as he himself not unfairly claimed to be. His fables, however, have been nearly forgotten, and are not of any remarkable merit, though written in an easy and polished style. The following is considered his best :—

THE MORAL MIRROR.

“ Once in a certain public square
 (I may not tell the when or where)
 A mirror stood, of wondrous kind ;
 It showed to each who looked therein
 Not the mere outward face and skin,
 But all the features of the mind.
 Not one of all the passers-by
 But stopped, and gazed with curious eye.
 Came a coquette ; she could not pass
 Without a study of the glass ;
 She saw reflected on its plane
 Her jealous arts, caprices vain :
 ‘ That picture—ha ! I know it well,—
 The very self of Isabel !
 It represents to admiration
 Her haughty airs and affectation ;
 A most instructive glass,’ she cried,
 ‘ To mortify that creature’s pride ! ’
 Next came a fop, and looked, and saw
 Reflected by this marvellous law
 Proud looks, with little sense ;
 Said he—‘ There’s Damon, on my word !
 The likeness really’s quite absurd—
 What insolent pretence !
 ’Twould do him good, conceited ass,
 To take a lesson from this glass ! ’
 Next came a miser, old and grim,
 Peering with purblind gaze ;

At once the glass reflected him
 In all his niggard ways :
 ‘ Ah ! that’s Ariston, stingy clown,
 Who’d sell himself for half-a-crown ;
 To show him up, now, would be funny ;
 I’d buy this glass—but for the money.’
 A thousand visitors, in short,
 Came, looked their fill, and made great sport
 Of all that they were shown ;
 Each, in the image there reflected,
 Some neighbour’s character detected—
 But never saw their own.”

The next is also pretty, though the introduction would show better, for every reason, in its French dress :—

THE HEN AND HER BROOD (v. 1).

“ As some young beauty, fresh from Morpheus’ arms,
 Waking displays a thousand new-born charms,
 So in the night
 Nature grows rich, and with the morning’s light
 Shows forth her fairest treasures new bedight.
 The smiling hills are tipped with radiant gold ;
 Th’ enamelled flowers unfold ;
 Before the deepening azure pales the rose
 Which o’er the fields of heaven Aurora sows :
 The crystal of the streams
 Glances and sparkles in the slanting beams ;
 The Zephyrs come to kiss fair Flora’s lips ;
 And from the bed of Thetis, where he dips
 At night, all-radiant Phœbus ’gins to rise.
 The shepherd hopes that on this genial day
 Nymphs will no more be coy ;
 Nature herself is gay,
 And breathes of love, of pleasure, and of joy.
 In such bright morning hours, a mother hen
 Led forth her brood from home,—

Their restless spirits wearying of their pen,—

 Into the fields to roam.

She watched them as they chirped, and pecked, and sported,
With the new joys of liberty transported,

When suddenly she stopped—looked in the sky—

 And with a piercing cry

Gave warning to her scattered progeny.

The little wanderers wished themselves at home;

 In the long grass they hid,

 Under a molehill slid,

Crouched in the cart-ruts, waiting what might come.

Some travellers stopped, and laughed at the poor mother;

‘She fears,’ said one, ‘her chicks may come to harm;

But I can see no reason for alarm:’

‘Nor I,’ rejoined another,

Casting a glance into the clear blue sky—

‘And yet I’m thought to have a keenish eye:’

‘That hen,’ they said,

‘Has some chimæra in her foolish head.’

A third came up—‘Here, take this glass,’ said he;

‘There’s a black speck just overhead, I see.’

Yes—’twas a bird; and, now they saw it clearer,

A vulture, plainly, coming near and nearer.

At last they made it out,

By scientific help—the glass had shown it:

Without a moment’s doubt,

At the first glance, the mother’s eye had known it.

O wondrous keenness of a mother’s sight!

O watchful care, that fails not day or night!

They paint Love blind; if he be wronged, his part

I leave for lovers, if they will, to take:

But the great love that fills a mother’s heart

Has more than Argus’ eyes, and all awake.”

THE ASS AND THE NIGHTINGALE (ii. 2).

" An Ass, mistrustful of his vocal powers,
 And conscious that his race
 Was not the work of Nature's happiest hours,
 Resolved to mend his case
 By learning music; and with that intent
 Into the woods he went,
 To hear the Nightingale, and learn her style.
 He listened for a while,—
 Some twice or thrice, it might be,—when he thought
 He really had no need of being taught;
 'My voice,' he told himself, 'is wondrous good,
 And—not to be vainglorious—
 'Gainst all the feathered singers in this wood
 I'd back my weakest notes to be victorious!'
 He brayed his loudest; all the songsters round
 Grew dumb with horror at the fearful sound
 Which through the forest rang;—
 Even the Nightingale was mute:
 'Ay,' said the long-eared brute,
 'I knew they'd all be silenced when *I* sang!'"

The writer leaves his readers to draw the moral. The cases in which the Ass brays down the Nightingale are at least as frequent in our own days as in his.

Aubert was an able literary critic as well as a writer of fables, and at different times either conducted or contributed to some of the best French literary journals. The chair of French literature in the College-Royal was founded expressly for him, and he held it for some years. Though much more of a philosopher than an ecclesiastic, he had little sympathy with the principles of the Revolution, and was suspected and attacked by the Jacobin party. But he weathered the storm, and lived to see the return of the Bourbons.

The Abbé Guillaume Le Monnier, though by ten years the senior of Aubert, did not publish his fables until nearly twenty years later. He was a man of humble origin, but the preface to his *Fables*, rather than the fables themselves, show him to have possessed very considerable abilities, and a cultivated taste. This preface is, in fact, a dissertation upon the principles of fable in general, combined with an appreciative criticism of La Fontaine, whose supremacy, as has already been said, Le Monnier heartily acknowledges. "I will speak of him," says he, "in a prose fable."

"A certain man had a son born to him. A Fairy who was present at his birth said to the father—'This child shall be famous in horse-racing and in travel: when he is grown up, I will make him a present of a steed.' From the moment the child could sit a horse, the father instructed him in the art of riding. All its precepts were carefully impressed upon him, a hundred times over. At last the Fairy arrived with her present—it was a horse with wings. The youth leaped upon it at once. The father cried out to him—'Forget, my son, forget all my lessons: grasp his mane, hold on tight, and let him carry you away.' The boy was La Fontaine—the steed was Pegasus."

Le Monnier makes this fable a text on which he dwells with much ingenuity to show how La Fontaine's great success was owing to his disregard of the recognised canons of his art, and his following a new line dictated only by his natural genius. "To compare other writers with La Fontaine is," he says, "to make the ordinary horse try to follow the horse with wings." For La Motte's more formal system he expresses almost contempt: "La Motte," he observes, "wrote a very

ingenious dissertation on the Art of Fable ; but at the same time he wrote fables which prove how little mere theory and cleverness can supply the place of genius." Perhaps we may be inclined to say in turn of Le Monnier's own fables, that they show him to have been stronger in criticism than in performance. Scarcely any of them are worth extracting ; and none are so pretty as the following little story, very much in the nature of a fable, which is to be found in this preface :—

" One day I called on a lady who had a reputation for cleverness. I waited in the drawing-room while she was finishing her toilet. Her two little girls, eight and six years old, were there playing at being " Mamma." They had set their dolls on two footstools ; these dolls were their children. Each mamma was teaching her daughter, lecturing her upon her faults, and all with a childish grace which much amused me. The mother came in, and saw me smiling. I repeated to her, aside, what I had just been listening to. She laughed too ; and then made the children begin the scene over again, not failing to criticise any faults of language that escaped the little actresses, and dictating to them what would be the more correct expression to use. All was spoilt : adieu to all natural grace and sportiveness and unconsciousness ! I had been listening to two little La Fontaines talking ; and now here were two little Houdard de La Mottes holding a dissertation ! "

Le Monnier was deprived of his cure, and thrown into prison, during the Reign of Terror, but was fortunate enough to be set at liberty at the general release of prisoners which followed the counter-revolution of the 9th Thermidor.

CHAPTER VII.

FLORIAN.

THE latest and the best of the French Fabulists of the eighteenth century (his fables did not appear until 1792) is Jean Paul Claris—better known under his surname of Florian, which he took from the castle of that name built by his grandfather in the Cevennes, where he was born. One of his uncles, an officer of cavalry, had married a niece of Voltaire; and the nephew spent a summer with this relative at Ferney. Voltaire took a great fancy to the handsome and clever boy, whom he called by the pet name of “Florianet,” allowed him to slice off the heads of the flowers in the garden while imagining himself to be Ajax among the Trojans, and helped him slyly in his themes, to the entire mystification of his surprised and gratified tutor. He was taken to Paris at an early age by one of his aunts, and initiated too early into the gay society of the capital. He became page to the Duke de Penthièvre, son of one of the illegitimate sons of Louis XIV., who seems to have been as fond of him as Voltaire had been, and gave him another pet name—“Pulcinella”—so much amused was he with the boy’s clever and sportive character. He soon began to

write little comedies, harlequinades, and pastorals, light and graceful enough, but probably owing much of their reputation to the position of their author in society,—for he was now gentleman-in-waiting to the Duke. Their little day of popularity has long passed away with the artificial taste which called them forth; but his fables will always be charming, and are not so well known as they deserve to be.

Florian is perhaps more of the Court poet than La Fontaine. He does not show the same love of country life, and his conceptions of it are of a more artificial kind, as was to be expected from one who confesses himself a disciple of Gesner—the author who did more than any other to awaken and develop, by his pastorals and idylls, that strange taste for reproducing the impossible Arcadia of the classic poets which seized upon French society towards the close of the sixteenth century,—a taste only to be explained by the fact that innocence and simplicity were to that society such very novel ideas. When Florian in one of his own pastorals grows enthusiastic on the charms of a country life, it is a French Arcadia that he is dreaming of, and not the woods and wilds of the Basses Cevennes. He wrote pastorals as he also wrote a sermon when he was a youth, without much more real vocation for a country life than for that of an ecclesiastic. It is never safe to take the poet's tastes in such matters as necessarily representing those of the man. Some pages of clever criticism have been written to prove that Virgil would have preferred above all things the life of a country gentleman; but it may be doubted whether he would have found himself as much at home in that position as he was in the court of

Augustus, or whether his theories in the Georgies would have insured him much success as a practical farmer.

Florian did not study his birds and beasts in their native fields and forests, as La Fontaine did : he found his birds, as he tells us himself, in the cages on the Quai de la Ferraille, where they were sold, and he had a large aviary adjoining his library. He does not trouble himself very much about their special natural history, so long as their leading popular characteristics serve the purpose of his story. He is commonly less cynical, and therefore less piquant, than La Fontaine : his morality often rises to a higher tone ; and there is a vein of melancholy which contrasts distinctly with the buoyant spirit and light and laughing touch of the earlier fabulist. He was living in times which he felt were evil—in the last days of the grand old French Monarchy ; on the brink of that terrible social revolution which was to desolate France, and to destroy that world of feudal grandeur, of aristocratic traditions, and of chivalrous sentiment, in which he had been born and lived. He loved the better side of it, while his eyes were not shut to its darker features—the tyranny and oppression on which so much of it rested, and from which its final overthrow was soon to come. All his sympathies and predilections, like his natural ties, were with the nobility ; but he would have had them show themselves noble in spirit as well as in blood. It is not difficult to discover—or at least to fancy we discover—in some of his fables a forecast of the coming storm. The melancholy pathos of the following, when we bear in mind the date at which it was written, has a meaning that can hardly be mistaken :—

THE CONFIDENT PARROT (iii. 19).

“ ‘ It will be nothing’—so the thoughtless cry,
 What time the storm hangs threatening in the sky ;
 ‘ Why vex ourselves before the evil day ? ’
 Why—but to save ourselves while yet we may ?
 A stout sea-captain once, who knew no fears,
 But lacked the prudence that became his years,

Resolved to put to sea :

What though the wind was high, the skies were wild,
Little recked he ;

Vain was the pilot’s warning ;
 Still came the same reply, all danger scorning—
 ‘ It will be nothing’—and the captain smiled.

A parrot sat on board,
 And caught the refrain of the captain’s word ;
 And all the while the good ship rushed ahead,
 ‘ It will be nothing,’ still the parrot said.
 Long time by adverse winds the barque was tossed ;

The course was lost :
 At last they lay becalmed ; short store of bread,
 No land in sight, all hearts disquieted.

The captain spoke no word ;
 ‘ It will be nothing,’ still repeats the bird.
 And day by day the measured food ran short,

Till, as a last resort
 (The crew were starving, and no help was nigh),

Even the sailor’s pets,
 Macaws and parroquets,
 To still their hunger, all were doomed to die.
 Sadly the parrot sat, and drooped his head ;
 ‘ It will be nothing,’—feeble still he said.
 Meanwhile his cage stood open on the deck,—
 He might have saved himself, if he had tried :

At last they wrung his neck ;
 ‘ It will—be—nothing,’ he gasped out, and died.”

The author himself was at least not one of those who,

under such ominous skies, lived in a fool's paradise. It is related of him that in September 1793, before the storm broke, he was one of a gay circle assembled together at the Chateau du Marais, belonging to Madame la Briche. They were acting one of Florian's little dramas, and he, as actor and stage-manager, was as usual the life and soul of the party. It was one of the most glorious days of autumn, and every one's spirits were at their highest under the brilliant sunshine and the clear blue sky. But in the midst of it all Florian grew thoughtful, and said to a friend, "We shall pay dearly, believe me, for these days of enjoyment!" He added a wish that, if he died young, he might be buried in a spot in the gardens which he pointed out. Some of the gay company laughed when they heard of it, and went so far as to compose for him a jesting epitaph. But in little more than a year his presentiment was fulfilled.

He had felt some sympathy with the revolutionary movement, but it soon took a turn which he did not expect, and which bitterly disappointed him. Still he hoped to escape the general proscription levelled against men of talent. But some of his writings had been denounced, and he was arrested by a mandate of Robespierre. Then he seems to have lost heart entirely, and descended to petitions and memorials to the authorities of the day, which were quite unworthy of his name and blood. "Can a poor writer of fables and pastorals like me"—such was his language—"commit crimes against the people? Let me go back to my books and my printers, whom I have maintained for fifteen years." Such appeals were in vain. However, he was set at liberty, with Le Monnier and others, at the fall of the

Jacobins on the 9th Thermidor ; but his nerves and constitution were utterly shaken, and he died soon afterwards, before he had completed his fortieth year.

The fable which he gives as a kind of prologue to the rest is admirable. He would appear to have taken as his text two lines from La Fontaine—

“ A naked moral will disgust, they say ;
Linked with a story, it may make its way.”¹

FABLE AND TRUTH.

“ Truth from her well one day
 Stepped into upper air,
 Naked, as usual—and, if one must say,
 Her charms, from age, somewhat the worse for wear.
 All, young and old, at the strange vision fled :
 Poor Truth stood shivering there,
 Nor found a sheltering roof to hide her head.
 When full in sight my lady Fable came,
 Bedecked with plumes and diamonds—mostly false,
 But brilliant all the same.
 ‘ What, is it you ? ’ she cried—‘ Good-day, my dear !
 What in the name of wonder make you here ?
 And all alone, too, in the public street ! ’
 ‘ Alas ! ’ said Truth, ‘ I’m starving with the cold,
 And not a soul I meet,
 Humbly as I entreat,
 Will give me shelter.—Ah ! when one gets old,
 One grows a fright, you see—men scorn me now.’
 ‘ Well, you’re my younger sister, anyhow,’
 Said Fable ; ‘ and—don’t think me vain to say so—
 I’m pretty well received : from me, I vow,
 Men do not run away so.

¹ “ Une morale nue apporte de l’ennui ;
 Le conte fait passer le precepte avec lui.”

—La Fontaine, vi. 1.

But—my dear Truth—this primitive costume !
 O fie ! it's not the thing ; look here,—there's room
 Under my cloak for both ;
 Come—don't be loath,—
 We shall do best in partnership, believe me :
 The wise, for your wise sake, will all receive me,
 And, for my sake, the fools
 Will not object so much to your strict rules.
 To each will we dispense
 Food to their taste, so all will be delighted :
 Thanks to my folly and to your good sense,
 We shall find welcome always, thus united.”

Florian's mother was a Spaniard ; he had learnt her language, and borrowed some few of his subjects from the Spanish poet Yriarte : for instance, “The Ape and the Magic Lanthorn,” “The Rope-dancer,” and “The Ass and the Flute.” But these are hardly his best, or at least so well suited for translation as those given below. The first is said to have been intended to satirise Madame de Genlis, and its last line has almost passed into a proverb.

THE SILKWORM (v. 12).

“ Talking among themselves one day,
 The animals, each in their different way,
 The Silkworm's skill were praising :
 ‘ How wondrous fine
 She spins her threads ! such talent is divine !
 And then the price they fetch is quite amazing !’
 Only the Spider had some fault to find ;
 She showed a critic's mind,
 Putting in ‘ifs’ and ‘buts,’ and not a few—
 Remarks that seemed to them quite out of season :
 ‘ Sirs,’ said the Fox, ‘ you understand the reason ?
 Madame spins too.’”

The two next are of somewhat the same character : the first of them is borrowed, as is the case with two or three others of Florian's fables, from the English of Gay.

THE PEACOCK, THE GEESE, AND THE DIVER
(iii. 16).

"His jewelled tail a peacock was displaying ;
Admiring birds their compliments were paying ;
While from the neighbouring mere
Two geese turned up their noses with a sneer :
They noted only his defects. Said one,
'What hideous feet ! what legs to stand upon !'
'And then his voice !'
Remarked the other ; 'of the two, for choice,
I think the screech-owl has the best of it :'
And each laughed loudly at the other's wit.
Up jumped a Diver ; 'Gentlemen,' said he,
'You have discerning eyes ;
Full three miles off that bird's defects you see ;
But let me tell you this—
You have a voice and legs far worse than his,
Without his brilliant dyes.'"

"The Shepherd and the Philosopher" of Gay appears as "The Philosopher and the Farmer" (iv. 1) ; and Gay's well-known "Hare and many Friends" is "The Hare, her Friends, and the two Deer" (iii. 7) of Florian. In the French fable the moral is strengthened by the contrast between the many and inconstant friends of the Hare, who all fail her in the day of trouble, and the exclusive and faithful attachment of the two Deer, who save each other from the hounds ; but the machinery is somewhat clumsy.

THE PARROT (iv. 3).

" An old grey Parrot from his cage had flown,
 And fixed his quarters in a neighbouring wood ;
 And there he sat, affecting quite the tone
 Of modern connoisseurs, as nearly as he could,
 And criticised with supercilious air
 Each bird that warbled there.
 Even the nightingale's enchanting song
 He found too long ;
 Besides, her cadences were sometimes wrong.
 As for the linnet,
 Her style was poor—there was no science in it ;
 Besides, her voice was waning.
 The lark—well, possibly, when she was young,
 Had she enjoyed the advantage of his training,
 She might have sung.
 In short, no bird could please him : when they chaunted,
 He hissed so loud that they all stopped, quite daunted.
 Tired out with such affronts, the birds one day
 Approached him in a body. 'Sir,' said they,
 ' You always hiss, and mercilessly flout
 These poor attempts of ours ;
 You have a splendid voice yourself, no doubt ;
 For our instruction, just for once display
 Your own superior powers.'

The critic was embarrassed—scratched his head—
 And slowly said :
 ' Ladies and gentlemen, the fact is this ;
 I don't sing much,—but I know how to hiss.' "

THE KING AND THE TWO SHEPHERDS (i. 3).

" A certain king one day bewailed his fate ;—
 The affairs of state
 Did so perplex him :
 ' Lives there a man,' he murmured, ' small or great,
 That has so much to vex him ?

I long for peace—yet go to war I must;
 I love my subjects—yet the taxes rise;
 I love the truth—men always tell me lies;

There's no one I can trust.

My people are distrest,
 I myself get no rest:

As for advice, I seek the very best;
 I try all means for help, and all in vain;

The more I try, the more I don't succeed.
 Just then his Majesty saw on the plain

A flock of sheep at feed,
 Lean, closely shorn,

Ewes without lambs, and lambs without their mothers,

Wandering and bleating, utterly forlorn:

The rams, half-starved, were straying, and the others
 Gave their unhappy shepherd much ado.

Now 'twas a sheep would bolt into the wood,

Now 'twas a lamb that in a lazy mood

Would lag behind, and now his favourite ewe;

He ran, and raved, and panted,

But always missed the point where he was wanted:

While he runs one way, comes a wolf another,

And steals a sheep—he rushed to make him drop it,

When the wolf's brother

Pounced on the lamb, before the man could stop it.

Breathless at last he stopped, and tore his hair,

And beat his head, and in his sore despair

Prayed death to end his pains.

'That's me exactly,' thought the King: 'these swains,

Like me, find government no joke;

To rule our flocks is no such easy matter.'

As he spoke,

He saw another flock, much fatter,

Down in the vale below: rams quite a model

Of what a ram should be, with ewes surrounding—

Ewes with such fleeces they could hardly waddle—

To whose full udders happy lambs came bounding.

As for their shepherd, he
 Was making love-songs to some rustic Phillis
 Or Amaryllis,
 Stretched at his ease beneath a shady tree,
 Waking the tender echoes with his strain,
 Then tuning it upon his pipe again.

‘ Ha ! ’ said the King,
 ‘ This flock will come to grief ; wolves don’t much care
 For love-sick shepherds who do nought but sing ;
 One doesn’t scare

Such creatures with a sentimental ditty :
 Well—I should laugh, and think it no great pity.’
 Just then, as if to please him,
 Out springs a hungry wolf,—but, quick as thought,

Up jumps a dog to seize him.

Scared at the din,
 Two of the flock rushed wildly o’er the plain ;
 Off goes another dog, and brings them in,
 And in an instant order reigned again.

Stretched on the grass,
 The Shepherd saw it all, sang on, and let it pass.
 ‘ Zounds ! ’ cried the King, half-angry and quite jealous,
 ‘ How do you manage things, my friend ?
 The woods here swarm with wolves—your sheep are fat—
 You don’t disturb yourself a whit for that,
 And hardly take the trouble to attend ;—
 What is your secret ?—tell us.’
 ‘ Sire,’ quoth the Shepherd, ‘ there’s not much to tell ;
 My secret is—I choose my sheep-dogs well.’ ”¹

THE OWL, THE CAT, THE GOOSE, AND THE RAT (iii. 17).

“ An Owl, of whom some scholars had made prize,
 Lived in the college cloisters as their pet,
 And there he met

¹ The late Prince Consort, in a conversation with the Emperor Napoleon III., remarked that “ no monarch had ever been great without having a great Minister.”—Martin’s Life, vol. iv. p. 113.

A Cat and a young Goose, not over-wise—

These were the porter's treasures :

All three were friends, and shared their cares and pleasures.
Through college-chambers, lecture-rooms, and hall,

They walked about,

Went in and out,

As if they were the masters of it all.

Admitted members of a learned college,

They had imbibed good store of classic knowledge ;

Had read Herodotus, and Dion Cassius,

And Dionysius Halicarnassius ;

Disputed, too,

On knotty points, as learned doctors do.

One night they held a lively disputation,

Which in times past was the most famous nation.

'I give my voice for Egypt,' quoth the Cat,—

'A people wise and learned, grand and calm,
And full of reverence towards their gods—and that,

In my opinion, always bears the palm.'

'Nay, Athens has my vote,'

Rejoined the Owl; 'what elegance, what wit,

What gallantry in battle ! do but note

The heroes she gave birth to ! I submit

No people did so much with such small means :

Her place among the nations is a queen's.'

'Upon my word,' broke in the Goose, irately,

'You gentlemen amuse me greatly :

And how about the Romans, might I ask ?

To find their match in grandeur and in fame

Would be no easy task :

Your favourites, it is true, have made a name ;

But still, in peace or war,

Those conquerors of the world surpassed them far.'

Each held his ground, as far as words could go ;

When an old Rat who heard the conversation

(A learned Rat, who in his hole below

Was making a dry meal of college themes)

Said, 'Gentlemen, to me it seems

You have good reason for your choice of nation :
 Th' Egyptians worship Cats ; the Greeks, the Owl ;
 At Rome, the Geese are held in veneration,
 And have free quarters in the Capitol.

Whichever way our several interests veer,
 'Tis by that compass our opinions steer.'"

THE APES AND THE LEOPARD (iii. 1).

' A little band of gamesome Apes, one day,
 Met in the woods to play.
 The game was this : one had to hide his face
 Within a comrade's lap, while on his back
 He stretched his paw out for the rest to smack ;
 Then he must guess who struck ; and, in such case,
 Guessed wrong, of course :
 Then they all grinned, and screamed till they were hoarse.
 Attracted by the sound,
 A smart young leopard sallied from his lair,
 And with a gracious air
 Bowed most politely round.
 All trembled at his presence. ' Pray,' said he,
 'Don't be alarmed : I'm a good-natured beast—
 Don't stop for me—
 I would not interrupt you in the least :
 Nay, I've come here to-day
 Quite in a friendly way,
 To join your sports myself ; so pray go on,
 And I'll make one.'
 ' Oh, monseigneur ! your Highness is too good !
 What ! join in these rude sports with such as we ?'
 ' Well, 'tis my whim—just now I'm in the mood ;
 Besides, my Highness takes a philosophic view
 As to the rights of animals—don't you ?
 I go in for equality, you see :
 Come—let's begin.'

The Apes, delighted, listened fast enough
 (As fools will always listen to such stuff),
 And, with a general grin,
 Took it all in.

So the blindfolded Ape held out his paw :
 The Leopard smote,—beneath the princely claw
 Out sprang the blood. This time there was no doubt :

The poor Ape guessed who struck,
 But held his tongue, limped off, and cursed his luck :
 His comrades feigned a laugh—the prince laughed out.

So, one by one,
 The Apes made their excuses, and were gone,
 But muttered to themselves upon the way—
 ‘Such games with princes are not safe to play :

Under the velvet paw,
 Smooth as it looks, there always lurks a claw.’”

Like La Fontaine, Florian has sometimes included in his volume pieces which have no claim to be called fables. Such is the case with the following, which is only a story in verse, cleverly told :—

THE PACHA AND THE DERVISH—(iv. 7).

“Once at Marseilles I heard an Arab tell
 How that a great Pacha, in days gone by,
 Sent a small casket, having sealed it well,
 To the most learned sage in Araby :
 ‘Within this casket,’ said the Turk, ‘there lie
 Rubies and diamonds of rare worth :
 This prize I send to him whom you shall find,
 In your wise judgment, out of all mankind,
 The greatest fool on earth.’
 The Dervish took the thing, and straight set out
 To travel on this quest.
 Need he go far, you ask me ? Well, no doubt,
 Fools are not scarce ; but then—to make the choice ?

They came from North, and South, and East, and West—
Fools whose strong claims the puzzled sage confessed,

And all but gave his voice—

Ay, and the casket too—to more than one,
Who seemed the very man to fix upon ;
But that some secret feeling in his mind
Warned him a greater fool was yet to find.
Our friend pursued his quest from land to land
(The casket still in hand);

From shore to shore, from sea to sea he passed,
And reached Constantinople at the last.

The town was all in jubilee—‘ And why ?’
He asked an Imaum who was passing by ;
‘ What means this great rejoicing that I see ? ’

‘ Oh ! nothing much,’ said he ;
‘ Tis only our Grand Vizier has been sent
(Graced with a silken noose, for ornament)
To bear the Sultan’s firman to the Prophet
In Paradise—that’s all the meaning of it.
These little things amuse our folk—and so,

Our master, kindly soul,
Knowing how dull their lives are on the whole,
He just indulges them sometimes, you know.’

‘ Often ? ’ ‘ Oh, yes ! ’ ‘ Tis well,’ the sage replied ;
‘ One word beside—

Your new Grand Vizier—was he named to-day ? ’

‘ He was—and, see ! his Highness comes this way.’

The Dervish crossed the square,
And recognised his friend the Pacha there.

‘ Ha, well met, Dervish !—and the casket ? say,

What is your news ? ’

‘ I’ve travelled, sir, a long and weary way,
And have seen many fools ; but which to choose

‘ Twas hard to know :

To-day my task is done : Grand Vizier, lo !

(So may your slave find favour in your eyes)

To you I give the prize.’ ”

CHAPTER VIII.

LE BAILLY.

THERE seems something in fable naturally akin to the genius of the French language. The point, the vivacity, the finish, which a good fable ought to have, are all found in happiest combination in the best French writers. We need not, therefore, be surprised to find that this kind of composition continued to be highly popular in France. Not that very many collections of fables issued from the press; but it had become the habit of authors to put their lighter thoughts and fancies, satirical, humorous, or didactic, occasionally into that convenient form. The style and character of this species of writing gradually underwent a considerable change. The birds and beasts of *Æsop* and *Phædrus* were often replaced, as has been remarked, by more abstract personages; and when they still appeared, became much more decidedly human in their behaviour. The old broad moral which had sufficed for a simpler age no longer furnished variety enough for illustration; indeed, that vein had been pretty well worked out. Modern society had a thousand shades of character and laws of behaviour unknown to a ruder civilisation. And so the modern fable became

more often a brief form of allegory, and affecting what we call " prettiness " of conceit rather than force. This will be found very much the case with the fables of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

But here and there we come upon one which, though very different from the early models that held their ground so long, has quite as much vigour, and whose grave moral is almost solemn. Baron Frederick von Grimm, in his correspondence, has cited a fable of this kind which he assigns to a Captain de Lisle, and which expresses admirably in very brief words the claims of modern inquiry and the alarmed resistance of conservative orthodoxy :—

" To the doors of the Sorbonne
Truth one day came all alone ;
Her the porter met, and smiled—
' Say, what seek'st thou here, my child ? '
' Shelter is all I ask, in sooth ;'
' And your name ? ' ' My name is Truth.'
' Ha ! ' the guardian cried : ' Away !
Make escape while yet you may,
Ere I raise the hue and cry,
And denounce Impiety !'
Slow and sad she left the gate—
' You reject me ? I can wait ;
Child of Time am I—and he
All I seek will grant to me.' "

In 1801 appeared a small volume by Baron Dutramblay de Rubelles, who deserves some brief notice here as having successfully pleaded before Louis XVIII. the cause of young De Marson de la Fontaine, great grandson of the fabulist. Dutramblay's fables are slight, and

have more prettiness than point. One of the best is “The Sheep’s Petition” (ii. 16), which he inscribes to a “Madame P——;” a graceful compliment to the lady, if we may suppose that her character led to the dedication. The tone is as different as possible from that of La Fontaine, or indeed of any of the earlier fable-writers :—

“ Thus to the Ruler of the skies
 The Sheep made plaint in piteous guise :
 ‘ It ill beseems my place, I know,
 To weary Heaven with tales of woe ;
 Why should the gods who dwell on high
 Take note of such poor wretch as I ?
 And yet, O Jove ! hard is my fate,
 Whom in thy wrath thou didst create :
 Helpless, unarmed, the fierce ones still
 Oppress me at their wicked will.’
 Jove heard her prayer, looked down, and smiled ;
 ‘ Good creature, peaceable and mild !
 Hard-hearted wretches must they be,
 That could work harm to such as thee !
 I cannot change their brutal mind ;
 But thou shalt pay them back in kind :
 I give and grant thee, free and full,
 The horned weapons of the Bull ;
 I make thee valorous, fierce, and strong ;
 And woe to all who do thee wrong !’
 ‘ Ah ! mighty Jove,’ the suppliant said—
 I shall be marked for hate and dread !
 Take back thy gifts—they suit not me ;
 Life on such terms were misery.
 Thou mad’st me gentle : every sense
 Within me shrinks from violence ;
 If I gave pain, my heart would rue it—
 Better to suffer wrong than do it !’ ”

Towards the close of the last century, Antoine Francois Le Bailly, a young advocate whom the Duke of Orleans had taken under his patronage, published his first volume of Fables. He was an ardent admirer of La Fontaine, whom he adopted as his model in style and mode of treatment, though he confined himself almost entirely, in his later work, to original subjects; and, with a modesty and self-renunciation not too common amongst authors, suppressed in his later editions all such fables as he had adapted from common sources, and which he thought had been more successfully imitated by other French writers—in fact, all which had not also some claim to originality. Besides a second series of Fables, he published a volume of complimentary effusions in verse—‘*Hommages Poetiques*,’ he called them—in honour of La Fontaine, selected from Rousseau, Racine, Voltaire, Delille, &c., in 1821.

Le Bailly’s fables, if those which he suppressed had been included in the later edition, would have nearly equalled in number those of La Fontaine. Many of them are exceedingly graceful and elegant, and their tone is on the whole more good-humoured and less cynical. His political motto would appear to have been very much that of La Fontaine—“*Vive le Roi! Vive La Ligue!*” He swam with the tide. The verses in honour of Napoleon with which he closed his edition of 1811, he exchanged in 1823 for an eulogy on the Bourbons; and an allegorical fable composed in honour of the little King of Rome was replaced in his second series by another—“*The Bull-dog and the Spaniel*.”

Those which are given below are fair specimens of his style and subjects. The first is curious as a literary

reminiscence of a minor branch of commerce which has now disappeared. At the date of this fable, dried sage formed an article of export to China and Japan, the Dutch buying it up in large quantities from Provence for that purpose ; and so valuable was it, that the common rate of exchange is said to have been three chests of tea for one of sage.

MADAM SAGE AND MADAM TEA (iv. 15).

“ Far out at sea,
 A cargo of dried Sage met Madam Tea,
 Sailing for France from China. ‘ Ah ! good day,
 And whither bound, fair foreigner, I pray ? ’
 ‘ Europe, of course, my dear ; I’m quite the rage
 With all its population, low or high :

But pray, good Madam Sage,
 Where are *you* bound ? ” ‘ Oh, China ! ’ ‘ Really ! —why ? ’
 ‘ I love the country—as I ought, indeed—

They know my value there ;
 At home, they treat me almost like a weed :

Thank Heaven, the wind is fair—
 China’s the place where merit makes its way ;
 I’m going there—good-day ! ”

THE ASS AND THE HORSE (Fabl. Nouv., i. 6).

“ An Ass, past master in the graphic arts,
 Had finished a great picture—something new :
 The Animals, invited from all parts,
 Came to a private view.

His work the artist to their taste submitted ;
 It was a horse—‘ superb ! ’ they all admitted—
 ‘ Nature,’ they said, ‘ has found a rival here ! ’
 ‘ Humph ! ’ said the Ass—‘ to me that’s not so clear.

Our friend has done a clever thing, of course,
 But to my humble judgment it appears
 That to have perfect symmetry, that horse
 Should have had longer ears.”

The author has another fable conveying much the same moral—“The Hunchback and the Camel.” A Camel is being led through the streets, and the populace (to whom the strange animal is supposed to be a novelty) crowd round to admire him. A rich man, whose great desire is to have others pay court to him, praises the Camel’s look of submissiveness; a magistrate admires his air of gravity; a miser his sobriety. A Hunchback, who overhears these remarks, says—“Gentlemen, you have omitted his great merit, after all: see how lightly he moves under that large eminence which rises from his back! and what dignity and grace it adds to his appearance!” “In our praises of another,” concludes the author, “we commonly pass an eulogium on ourselves.”

THE PERSIAN PHILOSOPHER.

“A Persian sage,
 Who had borne all too long the jealous taunts
 Of fools who flourished in that stupid age,
 At length abjured mankind, and ‘mid the haunts
 Of the wild forest beasts, man’s natural foes,
 Sought silence and repose.
 ‘Nay,’ said a friend, ‘perhaps you do well to fly,
 Far as you may, from men’s society;
 They are, I grant, fools mostly, if not knaves;
 But to prefer these frightful dens and caves
 Where tigers prowl, and hungry lions roar—’
 ‘Friend,’ interposed the sage—‘no more:
 Beasts have but teeth and claws to work me wrong;
 Men have a tongue.’”

The following version is little better than a paraphrase, yet it may serve to convey some notion of the grace and beauty of the original.

THE ROSE AND THE BUSH (i. 13).

"A fair young Rose (her name Coquette),
With charms but half developed yet,
Beneath a sheltering Thorn-bush grew,
And much bemoaned her cheerless lot,
Imprisoned in so dull a spot,
Whose gloom was all she knew.
'Patience, my child; whilst here you find
Shelter from sun and stormy wind,
Rest you content,' the Bush replies;
'Thanks to my thorns, no insect pest
Can stain your tints, or soil your breast:
In shadow safety lies.'
The Rose, indignant, would not hear:
What was there in the world to fear?
Life, to that dull retirement tied,
Brought neither pleasure nor renown:
'Woodman, I pray thee, cut me down
This villain Bush,' she cried.
'Tis done: no more her guardian spread
Its kind protection overhead;
The Rose rejoices to be seen:
Her beauties court the public gaze;
A silly swarm of zephyrs plays
Around the garden's queen;
She hears sweet words of flattery—
'The fairest of all roses she;'
But o'er her leaves, in evil hour,
A caterpillar crawls at will,
And next a snail, more hateful still,
Attacks the opening flower;
The scorching sunshine pales her bloom,
The hot blasts waste her sweet perfume;

Too late, the hapless Rose recalls
 That kindly shelter scorned too soon :
 Ere she has reached her beauty's noon,
 She withers, droops, and falls."

The reader will not be far wrong who shall surmise that the extract from Le Bailly's pages with which this little volume is to be concluded has been chosen on the principle of keeping the best till last. It is as different as possible in character from anything of La Fontaine's. It has neither his vigour of expression nor his wonderful play of language. It is not so much a fable as a graceful legend ; but it strikes a note we should hardly have heard from La Fontaine. Of all the French literature of fiction, fable is the purest ; and even La Fontaine's muse, as has already been gladly acknowledged, is above reproach when she adopts fable as her costume. If we owe to Le Bailly, as seems almost certain, the invention as well as the arrangement of the following story of "The Venus of Zeuxis" (iii. 20), it ought of itself to be sufficient to rescue his name from the long list of forgotten poets.

Pliny records how the people of Agrigentum commissioned the great painter Zeuxis to execute a picture of Helen for their temple of Juno Lacinia.¹ Other writers place the scene at Crotona. He acceded to their request on one condition—that some of the most beautiful maidens of their city should display their charms before him, that he might choose from each some special grace of form or feature, and compose the whole into the perfection of female beauty. There was no difficulty, according to Pliny's story, in finding the models, and

¹ Nat. Hist., Book xxxv. c. 10.

the picture was a complete success. So far, the legend was common property. Le Bailly's adaptation of it is his own. He makes the subject of the picture to be Venus instead of Helen ; and he describes the painter as making choice of five out of the many candidates, in each of whom he thinks he sees some peculiar charm—Zelis, Aglaura, Thamyra, Glycera, and Anais. They are to disrobe before him ; and Zelis—only too proud “to be painted by Zeuxis, and painted as Venus”—sets the example at once ; the others follow, and stand before the painter as the rival goddesses stood before Paris—all but one :—

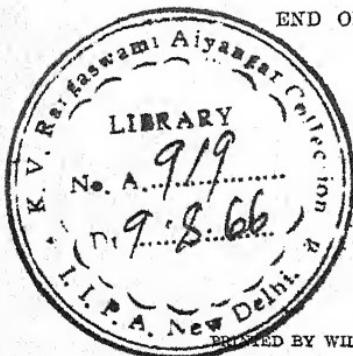
“ Fair Anais remained alone,
 With glowing cheek and eyes cast down.
 ‘ How ! ’ said the painter—‘ you refuse ?
 Is it you fear your charms might lose
 By close comparison with theirs ?
 Not so—each well with each compares :
 Do like the rest—you blush ? Nay, nay ;
 ‘ Tis nothing—art must have its way.’
 ‘ I—do like them ? Not though your hand
 Held Paris’ apple at command—
 Not at that price,’ the maiden said,
 And gathered close her robes, and fled.”

The picture was completed, however, from the other less scrupulous models, and all who saw it pronounced it to be a masterpiece, embodying all that could be conceived of womanly beauty. The friends of Zeuxis came to congratulate him on his complete success.

“ The Painter shook his head, and sighed ;
 Cast on his work a restless glance,
 And mused, and frowned, and looked askance,
 Then turned away, dissatisfied.

'How!' said an artist friend—'you sigh?
 Has it some fault, then, in your eye?'
 'Yes,' said the Painter, gloomily.
 'But you are wrong: each several grace
 Drawn from your models, I can trace—
 Aglaura, Zelis, Thamyra,
 All, all are there; and Glycera—
 Methinks I see her radiant smile—
 Yet no—'tis Venus all the while!'
 'Ah, flatterer, cease!' said Zeuxis: 'I
 Am in no mood for flattery.
 What Venus had not, they have not;
 That one sweet charm was all forgot;
 It failed my models as they stood—
 The crowning grace of womanhood.'
 'What is it, then, my friend, you miss?
 'The modesty of Anais.'"

END OF LA FONTAINE.



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